

Differences and Adaptation Strategies of Primary Education between China and the UK from the Perspective of Transnational Schooling

—A Case Study of a Primary School in Sunderland, UK and a Primary School in Hainan, China

Lina Wang^{1,2*}, MeiQi Ye^{1*}, Ying Zhang^{1*}, Chen Sun^{1#}, Wei Xu^{1#}, Yueyue Zhang¹, Cathy Westgate³, Hongyan Pi⁴, Nadja Damij²

¹School of Economics and Management, Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China

²Faculty of Business and Technology, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK

³Hudson Road Primary School, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, UK

⁴Affiliated Primary School of Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China

Email: lina1976113@126.com, 1974652859@qq.com, 2813365925@qq.com, #sunny5952@163.com, #ivy_xuwei@163.com, cathy.westgate@schools.sunderland.gov.uk, 379951250@qq.com, nadja.damij@sunderland.ac.uk

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Abstract

Taking the practice of transnational schooling (the cross-border educational experience of children who receive formal primary education outside their home country) of a 9-year-old child as the core empirical clue, this study selects one primary school in Sunderland, the UK and one primary school in Haikou, Hainan Province, China as research samples. We focus on the learning and daily life of Grade 3 and Grade 4 students in the two schools, and conduct a systematic comparison across eight core dimensions: grade adaptation (students' psychological, behavioral and academic adjustment to a new grade level), daily schedule arrangement, dietary support, after-school care, curriculum design, academic difficulty (the overall complexity, knowledge depth and learning progress of academic content), campus services and welfare protection (school-based services safeguarding children's basic living, physical and mental well-being). Adopting field observation, archival document analysis, case study and cross-cultural comparison methods, this study sorts out official institutional documents and campus operation rules of the British school, as well as daily management and teaching norms of the Chinese school.

*These authors contributed equally to this work.

#Corresponding authors.

Based on evidence collected from direct field observation, official school documents and the personal experience of the focal child, this paper identifies the core differences in value orientation, operational mechanism and support systems between the two sampled primary schools. Within the scope of these two cases, the British primary school prioritizes child welfare protection and builds a flexible, diversified education service system. Students of the same age show higher grade adaptation; mathematics teaching progresses relatively fast, and greater emphasis is placed on children's personalized development and physical and mental health. The Chinese primary school takes systematic knowledge transmission as its core goal, and runs a standardized, well-organized education management model targeting all-round student development. It features a comprehensive curriculum, solid knowledge teaching and sound free after-school public welfare services. This micro comparative analysis of real educational practices provides case evidence for cross-cultural educational communication, and offers practical references for the diversified development, welfare service improvement and international adaptation of primary education in China.

Keywords

Chinese and British Primary Education, Comparative Education, Transnational Schooling, Learning and Life, Education Service System, Academic Cultivation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As the cornerstone of national education systems, basic education models are deeply shaped by national culture, social institutions and educational philosophies [1]. Cross-national educational differences manifest not only in macro policies and theories, but also in every detail of students' daily learning, campus life and home-school interaction. Amid deepening economic globalization and educational internationalization, a growing number of families choose transnational schooling due to academic visits, overseas employment and relocation [2]. The adaptation process of children across different education systems provides a micro, immersive perspective for comparative education research, making up for the limitation of traditional studies that overemphasize macro theories while lacking practical empirical support [3].

This study is centered on the real transnational schooling experience of a 9-year-old child. The child studied in Grade 3 at the Affiliated Primary School of Hainan Normal University in Haikou, China, and transferred directly to Grade 4 at Hudson Road Primary School in Sunderland, UK when the child's parents went abroad for academic visits. Taking this individual experience as the starting point, this study investigates the learning and living status of Grade 3 and Grade 4 students in the two sampled schools, and explores the inherent differences in opera-

tional logic, value orientation and service systems [4].

Different from prior comparative studies focusing on macro national curriculum policies, this research focuses on on-campus micro practice. It incorporates typical British school practices (the Breakfast Club, paid after-school care, cross-school practical courses and tiered inclusive meals) and Chinese school practices (free on-campus after-school care, standardized curriculum, academic-oriented schedules and family-managed catering) into the analytical framework, so as to enhance the empiricism and pertinence of cross-national primary education comparison [5].

1.2. Research Significance

1.2.1. Practical Significance

First, it provides detailed and specific campus operation references for families planning transnational schooling, helping families quickly grasp the institutional gaps between Chinese and British primary education, make advance preparations for children's cross-cultural adaptation, and cut down transnational adaptation costs. Second, it supplies frontline primary teachers and education administrators with paired comparative cases of daily management, teaching delivery and after-school service operation, offering replicable practical experience for China's primary school teaching reform, campus service optimization and after-school system upgrading. Third, it accumulates micro empirical materials for internationalized primary education adaptation research, supporting the construction of targeted education support systems for cross-border school-age children.

1.2.2. Theoretical Significance

First, it expands the micro research dimension of comparative education, bringing catering support, after-school care, campus daily services and transnational adaptation into the primary education comparison system, filling the research gap that traditional comparative education overly concentrates on curriculum and teaching while ignoring student life service links. Second, it optimizes the cross-cultural basic education comparison research framework, adopting a single child's transnational learning experience as the logical thread to realize the integration of individual in-depth case analysis and systematic institutional comparison, and provides new research ideas and methodological references for comparative education scholars. Third, it deepens theoretical understanding of the core value orientations of Chinese and British basic education; through micro-level campus practice comparison, this paper interprets the institutional embodiment of two distinct educational logics—child welfare priority and systematic knowledge inheritance—and offers theoretical basis for cross-cultural basic education integration.

1.3. Research Objects and Methods

1.3.1. Research Objects

The main research objects are two public primary schools: Hudson Road Community Primary School in Sunderland, UK (hereinafter referred to as the British school) and the Affiliated Primary School of Hainan Normal University in Hai-

kou, China (hereinafter referred to as the Chinese school). The research focuses on educational activities and campus life of Grade 3 and Grade 4 students in the two schools. Meanwhile, one 9-year-old child with transnational schooling experience is set as the focal child. The child's learning adaptation, academic performance and campus emotional experience connect the comparative analysis of the two schools' daily educational practice.

1.3.2. Research Methods

Field observation method: Researchers tracked the focal child's daily learning, classroom activities, campus events, after-school care and catering arrangements continuously. We recorded the child's learning experience, adaptation process and behavioral performance to collect first-hand field data.

Archival document analysis method: We systematically collected and sorted official documents of the British school (school calendars, timetables, dress codes, catering regulations, admission materials and after-school care notices) and management documents of the Chinese school (daily rules, curriculum schedules and after-school care policies). All documents were classified, organized and cross-referenced for standardized comparative analysis.

Case study method: We take the grade adaptation, academic adaptation and cross-cultural experience of the focal child as the core case, and analyze how institutional practice gaps between Chinese and British primary schools affect cross-border students' adaptation efficiency.

Cross-cultural comparison method: Combined with China and the UK's respective cultural traditions, social welfare frameworks and educational philosophy systems, we interpret the root causes of practical differences between the two sampled schools.

1.3.3. Empirical Research Design

This section supplements detailed fieldwork arrangements to clarify the empirical design.

The entire field observation period lasted for 12 consecutive weeks, from September to November 2025. A total of 48 formal on-site observation sessions were conducted in the two schools, with 24 sessions in each institution. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, maintaining an objective perspective without interfering with normal teaching and campus activities. During each observation, standard field notes were recorded in real time to document daily routines, teaching activities and service operations. All collected school documents were numbered, categorized and cross-checked with field notes to ensure data consistency and authenticity.

1.3.4. Selection of Eight Comparison Dimensions

The eight comparison dimensions in this study were selected based on existing literature on cross-border student adaptation and primary education comparative research. The dimensions cover grade setting, daily operation, student support, teaching and evaluation, forming a complete analytical framework for primary

school operation. Identical evaluation indicators and observation standards were applied to both schools throughout the comparison, ensuring the consistency and comparability of cross-case analysis.

2. Comparison of Grade Adaptation and Core School Orientation between Chinese and British Primary Schools

2.1. Core Differences in Grade Adaptation

The age-grade matching rule is the most obvious difference between the two sampled schools, fully reflected by the focal child's experience: the 9-year-old child studied in Grade 3 in the Chinese school and was placed in Grade 4 after transferring to the British school.

Evidence from school documents: The British primary school follows the national grading system of England (Year 1 to Year 6), divided into Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Grade division is mainly based on children's chronological age, with strict age-grade correspondence: children aged 5 enter Year 1, and 9-year-old students are arranged in Year 4 (Children enter school in the academic year that they are 5 and that is called Reception). Grade adaptation prioritizes children's physical and mental development stages rather than pure knowledge proficiency.

Evidence from field observation and school documents: The Chinese primary school implements six-year compulsory education. Grade adaptation considers both age and academic foundation. Generally, 8-year-old children enter Grade 3, and most 9-year-old students remain in Grade 3. Grade division emphasizes the continuity and progression of knowledge, reserving sufficient time for students to consolidate basic knowledge.

This difference in grade adaptation further affects academic content and teaching progress, laying a foundation for the subsequent comparison of academic difficulty and curriculum settings.

2.2. Core School Orientation

2.2.1. British Primary School: Dual Orientation of Holistic Development and Welfare Protection

Evidence from field observation & official documents: The British school takes holistic student development and welfare protection as its core orientation. It functions as both an educational institution and a service platform for safeguarding children's living needs and mental health, adhering to a child-centered philosophy. A series of supporting services (free breakfast, tiered inclusive lunches, flexible schedules and after-school care) fully prioritize children's well-being, and academic arrangements are formulated according to children's developmental characteristics. The school integrates education and social welfare into a unified service system.

2.2.2. Chinese Primary School: Core Orientation of Moral Education and Systematic Teaching

Evidence from field observation & official documents: The Chinese school focuses

on moral education and systematic knowledge teaching, adhering to the educational concept of all-round development of morality, intelligence, physical education, aesthetics and labor education. Standardized schedules, curriculum arrangements and academic evaluation systems aim to build students' solid knowledge foundation and good learning habits. Moral education runs through all teaching activities. The school's core function is teaching, supplemented by free public welfare after-school services.

3. Comparison of Daily Schedule and Dietary Support System between Chinese and British Primary Schools

3.1. Daily Schedule Arrangement: Flexible Adaptation vs. Standardized Efficiency

The schedule arrangements of Chinese and British primary schools are both carried out around their core orientations. The schedule of British primary schools is characterized by welfare orientation and flexible adaptation, taking into account children's living needs and families' parenting needs; the schedule of Chinese primary schools is characterized by teaching orientation and standardized efficiency, focusing on the efficiency and systematizations of knowledge teaching.

3.1.1. British Primary School: Welfare-Oriented Flexible Schedule System

Evidence from field observation & official documents: The British school's schedule is family-friendly and flexible. The school gate opens at 8:00 for the free Breakfast Club before formal classes start at 8:40. Formal teaching ends at 15:15. The school provides half-day and full-day schooling options for families. Paid after-school care run by cooperative community organizations is available until around 18:00, mainly for student supervision and leisure activities (Flexible in nursery 3 - 4 year olds. Years 1 - 6 cannot usually choose to be part time unless there is a particular reason then only short term.).

3.1.2. Chinese Primary School: Teaching-Oriented Standardized Schedule System

Evidence from field observation & official documents: The Chinese school adopts a standardized schedule centered on teaching. Students arrive at around 7:40 for morning reading. Classes are compact and fixed, and regular schooling ends at 16:00. Free voluntary after-school care lasts until 17:30, focusing on homework guidance and knowledge consolidation.

3.2. Dietary Support System: Inclusive Welfare vs. Family Independence

3.2.1. British Primary School: Graded Inclusive Dietary Support System

Evidence from official documents & field observation: The British school integrates catering into social welfare. The free Breakfast Club serves all students. Lunches are charged at £2.5 per meal; Year 1 - 2 students enjoy free lunches, and financially disadvantaged families can apply for meal exemptions (Purchased by

the school with government funding. Has to follow strict government foods standards.).

3.2.2. Chinese Primary School: Family-Independent Dietary Support Model

Evidence from official documents & field observation: The Chinese school does not provide unified catering services. Breakfast and lunch are fully arranged by families. The school only provides dining venues and simple heating facilities, without taking charge of food production, purchase or management.

4. Comparison of Curriculum Design and Academic Difficulty between Chinese and British Primary Schools

4.1. Curriculum System: Core Focus vs. Comprehensive Coverage

4.1.1. British Primary School: Core Curriculum as the Main Body, Supported by Characteristic Courses

Evidence from school documents & field observation: The British school takes English, Mathematics and Science as core courses. It provides free targeted English tutoring for foreign students, and arranges regular off-campus swimming courses as practical education.

4.1.2. Chinese Primary School: Comprehensive Coverage and Balanced Development

Evidence from school documents & field observation: Following the national compulsory education curriculum plan, the Chinese school implements a three-tier curriculum system (national, local and school-based courses), covering all-round quality education including morality, sports, art, science and labor education.

4.2. Academic Difficulty: Advanced Progress vs. Solid Foundation

4.2.1. Academic Difficulty and Teaching Progress

Evidence from teaching materials & field observation: In the British school's Year 4, mathematics teaching progresses faster. Courses cover fraction operations, two-digit multiplication and division, and large number recognition. Students are required to master the 12×12 multiplication table, with more emphasis on logical thinking and practical application and less repetitive drills.

Evidence from teaching materials & field observation: In the Chinese school's Grade 3, mathematics teaching focuses on basic knowledge consolidation, including addition and subtraction within ten thousand, single-digit multiplication and preliminary fraction knowledge. The curriculum uses the 9×9 multiplication table, with gentle knowledge gradients and sufficient basic exercises.

4.2.2. Academic Evaluation Methods

Evidence from school documents & field observation: The British school adopts process-oriented comprehensive evaluation, with few formal written examinations. Teachers assess students via classroom performance, group activities and

daily observation, and evaluation results are presented by grades without ranking. Especially, Year 6 have formal externally marked tests in reading English grammar, spelling and mathematics near the end of the year. They practice for these doing school-based tests and work on test style questions (Results of year 6 tests are used to rank schools not pupils). And Year 4 have to do a quick recall multiplication test online with results collected nationally.

Evidence from school documents & field observation: The Chinese school combines daily performance and periodic written tests (unit, mid-term and final examinations). Scores are used to assess knowledge mastery, so as to find and make up for learning deficiencies in a timely manner.

5. Comparison of After-School Care and Campus Services between Chinese and British Primary Schools

5.1. After-School Care: Paid Supervision vs. Free Public Welfare

5.1.1. British Primary School: Paid Commercial Supervision-Oriented Care

Evidence from official documents & field observation: After-school care is a paid service co-operated with community organizations, running from 15:15 to 18:00. Its main function is safety supervision and leisure activities, rather than academic tutoring.

5.1.2. Chinese Primary School: Free Public Welfare Academic Guidance-Oriented Care

Evidence from official documents & field observation: After-school care is a free public welfare service. Teachers provide homework guidance and knowledge consolidation, with a small number of interest activities arranged appropriately.

5.2. Characteristic Campus Services: Off-Campus Resource Integration vs. On-Campus Independent Operation

Evidence from multiple sources: The British school actively cooperates with off-campus professional institutions to launch characteristic courses and provides personalized language support for foreign students. The Chinese school relies entirely on internal teachers, venues and resources to carry out all teaching and service work, and maintains close home-school communication.

6. Cultural Roots and Value Reflection of Primary Education Differences between the Two Sampled Schools

6.1. Analysis of Cultural Roots

The practical gaps between the two sampled primary schools originate from differences in cultural traditions, social welfare systems and educational philosophies between China and the UK.

6.1.1. Cultural Roots of the British School's Operational Characteristics

Evidence from comprehensive data: Influenced by the concept of children's rights

and a sound social welfare system, the British school adheres to a child-centered model. All grade rules, schedules and catering services prioritize children's living needs and physical and mental health. Individualism in local culture also promotes personalized development and reduces academic pressure on students.

6.1.2. Cultural Roots of the Chinese School's Operational Characteristics

Evidence from comprehensive data: Influenced by traditional Confucian education and collectivist concepts, the Chinese school attaches importance to systematic knowledge inheritance and all-round student development. The public welfare nature of basic education in China supports free after-school services to meet family tutoring demands.

6.2. Value Reflection: Complementary Advantages Rather than Superiority or Inferiority

This part discusses the respective strengths of the two investigated schools. The differences between them reflect two distinct value orientations: the British school prioritizes child welfare, while the Chinese school prioritizes knowledge inheritance. Such differences are shaped by local culture, social demands and institutional arrangements, and neither model is absolutely superior.

6.3. Confounding Factor Analysis

Several potential confounding factors may affect students' grade adaptation and overall performance, and should be distinguished from national educational system differences.

First, school type: Both research sites are public primary schools with fixed school-running positioning and resource allocation, which may not fully represent private or rural schools in the two countries.

Second, local policy context: The British school is subject to national welfare and education policies of England, while the Chinese school follows compulsory education policies of Hainan Province; regional policy differences will inevitably affect on-campus services.

Third, family background: The focal child's family has overseas academic experience, which brings cross-cultural adaptation advantages different from ordinary families.

Fourth, prior language ability: As a non-native English speaker, the child faced inherent language barriers when entering the British school, which exerted extra influence on daily adaptation and academic performance.

All the above factors are independent of the essential differences between the two national education systems.

7. Conclusions and Implications

7.1. Research Conclusions

Based on the transnational schooling experience of one 9-year-old focal child and

immersive comparison of two sampled primary schools, this study draws the following conclusions limited to these two cases:

1) The two schools adopt different age-grade matching rules. The British school sets grades according to children's age, while the Chinese school balances age and academic foundation. This difference directly affects teaching progress and academic difficulty.

2) In terms of schedule and catering: The British school runs a welfare-oriented flexible schedule and tiered inclusive catering system; the Chinese school uses a standardized teaching schedule, with all catering undertaken by families.

3) In curriculum and academic evaluation: The British school focuses on core courses, with faster mathematics progress and process-based evaluation. The Chinese school implements a comprehensive curriculum system, combining process assessment and periodic examinations.

4) In after-school care and campus services: The British school provides paid leisure-oriented after-school care and integrates off-campus resources; the Chinese school offers free academic-oriented after-school care and relies on internal campus resources.

In summary, the two investigated schools represent two different value orientations: the British institution takes "child welfare first", and the Chinese institution takes "knowledge inheritance first". Both models adapt to local culture, social systems and family demands.

7.2. Optimization Implications for China's Primary Education

Referencing the operational experience of the British sampled school, we put forward targeted optimization suggestions for primary education in China: improving inclusive catering services, optimizing grade setting and teaching progress, enriching after-school care content, expanding the use of off-campus educational resources, and improving personalized support for special student groups.

7.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study has obvious limitations:

The effective sample of this research includes only one focal child and two public primary schools. The sample size is small, and the research findings cannot be generalized to all primary schools or all Grade 3 - 4 students in China and the UK. Conclusions drawn from this single-case and two-school design cannot be extended to make universal judgments on national-level primary education systems.

For future research, we suggest expanding the sample scope to include schools in different regions and different school types, enriching research dimensions, adding interview data from teachers, parents and students, and exploring localized integration paths combining advantages from both educational models.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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