

Collectivism vs. Individualism: A Study on Cultural Differences in Basic Education Goals between China and Finland

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Abstract:

This literature review investigates how cultural values, specifically Hofstede's dimensions of collectivism and individualism, shape the fundamental goals of basic education in China and Finland. Despite both nations achieving high performance in international assessments like PISA, they represent two diametrically opposed educational philosophies, making them a compelling comparative case. Existing research often provides rich descriptions of either system but lacks a systematic comparison from a core cultural-values perspective. To address this gap, this study employs a systematic literature review, using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory as a framework to analyze and compare the cultural roots, core features, and societal manifestations of educational goals in both countries. The analysis reveals that China's collectivist and Confucian heritage fosters a system prioritizing standardized academic excellence, high-stakes testing, and talent cultivation for national development, often at a cost to individual student well-being and creativity. In contrast, Finland's individualist and egalitarian culture underpins a system focused on student well-being, critical thinking, and personal autonomy, demonstrating that holistic development and high academic achievement can be synergistic. The review concludes that educational goals are organic outgrowths of deep-seated cultural contexts. This is highlighted by China's recent "double reduction" policy reform, which, despite aiming to incorporate individualist-oriented goals like reducing student stress, encounters significant tension with the prevailing collectivist values. The findings suggest that meaningful educational transformation requires careful cultural adaptation rather than direct policy transfer.

Keywords: Collectivism; individualism; cultural differences; basic education

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, education, as a core carrier of social culture, exhibits remarkable diversity in its philosophies and practices. This diversity is shaped by the unique cultural traditions and value systems of different nations. Among these, the cultural dimensions of collectivism and individualism provide a critical theoretical lens for understanding the divergent educational goals across countries [1].

China and Finland present a compelling comparative case: both have achieved outstanding performance in international assessments (e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)), yet they represent two distinct educational philosophies and practical pathways, making them a "perfect ideal comparative case in education research.

Heavily influenced by Confucian collectivist cultural traditions, China's education system has long been characterized by its focus on academic excellence, high-stakes testing, and cultivating talent to serve national development [2]. However, this examination-oriented model has also sparked profound concerns about suppressed student creativity, psychological well-being, and holistic development, leading directly to the recent "double reduction" policy that aims at alleviating academic burdens. In contrast, Finnish education is globally renowned for its "less is more" philosophy, high-trust autonomy, and emphasis on student well-being and critical thinking—a reflection of the Nordic society's strong egalitarian and individualist cultural foundations [3]. The excellence of both systems, despite their diametrically opposed paths, raises a central research question: How do cultural values shape and determine the fundamental goals of basic education in different societies?

Although existing studies have richly described either the "exam-oriented" nature of Chinese education or the "joyful" model of Finnish schooling, most are confined to single-country analyses or remain at the level of superficial phenomenological comparison. A systematic and critical comparative analysis from the perspective of core cultural values is still lacking. Specifically, the underlying cultural logic that connects values to goals remains underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a systematic literature review, employing Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory as a framework, to deeply analyze and compare the cultural roots, core features, and societal manifestations of basic education goals in China and Finland. This research not only seeks to clarify the cultural essence of the differences in educational philosophies between the two countries but also hopes to provide a cross-cultural perspective for understanding the current dilemmas and directions of

educational reform in China. Furthermore, it offers theoretical insights for constructing more balanced educational objectives within a global perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework: Collectivism, Individualism, and Educational Goals

This section establishes the key concepts and theoretical lens that underpin the entire comparative analysis. The core framework is built upon Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, specifically the dichotomy of Collectivism versus Individualism.

2.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions: Collectivism vs. Individualism

Hofstede's framework defines societies based on how individuals integrate into groups [4]. Collectivist societies, exemplified by China, prioritize the goals and well-being of the in-group (e.g., family, nation) over individual desires. In these cultures, values such as social harmony, loyalty, and maintaining "face" are paramount, and relationships often define identity. In contrast, individualist societies, exemplified by Finland, value personal autonomy, self-fulfillment, and the expression of individual opinions. Ties between individuals are looser, and personal identity is separated from group affiliations. This cultural contrast is quantitatively supported by the Hofstede Insights (n.d.) index, where China scores low on Individualism (often around 20) while Finland scores high (around 63). It is important to note that while Hofstede's dimensions provide a valuable and widely used framework for cross-cultural comparison, they are not without limitations. Critics point out that the model may oversimplify complex cultural realities into binary oppositions and that its foundational data, being temporally bound, might not fully capture dynamic cultural shifts. Acknowledging these constraints, this study employs Hofstede's theory as a heuristic lens—rather than a deterministic rule—to initiate a structured analysis of the broad value systems that underpin educational philosophies in China and Finland.

2.2 Defining Educational Goals

Educational goals represent the fundamental values and desired outcomes that a society aims to achieve through its schooling system. For this analysis, these goals are operationalized along the three following dimensions, which are hypothesized to be influenced by cultural values:

Primary Purpose: Is education primarily for national development and group advancement (Collectivism) or for personal growth and self-realization (Individualism)?

Defining Success: Is it measured by academic rankings, exam scores, and contribution to the collective, or by happiness, creativity, and the development of individual potential?

Role of the Learner: Is the student a passive recipient of knowledge for a standardized goal or an active co-creator of their own learning journey?

2.3 Linking Culture to Education: The Theoretical Bridge

The theoretical proposition is that cultural values act as a blueprint for educational design [5].

A collectivist culture logically leads to an education system that emphasizes: standardized curricula, uniform standards, competitive examinations to stratify and select talent for the group's benefit, and respect for the teacher as an authority figure.

An individualist culture logically fosters a system that emphasizes: personalized learning paths, inclusivity, fostering critical thinking to form independent opinions, and viewing the teacher as a facilitating guide or mentor.

This framework will be used to analyze and interpret the specific characteristics of the Chinese and Finnish systems in the following sections.

3. The Cultural Logic of Educational Goals in China (Collectivist Context)

It is important to note that while Hofstede's dimensions provide a valuable and widely used framework for cross-cultural comparison, they are not without limitations. Critics point out that the model may oversimplify complex cultural realities into binary oppositions and that its foundational data, being temporally bound, might not fully capture dynamic cultural shifts. Acknowledging these constraints, this study employs Hofstede's theory as a heuristic lens—rather than a deterministic rule—to initiate a structured analysis of the broad value systems that underpin educational philosophies in China and Finland.

The Chinese education system is a profound manifestation of its deep-rooted collectivist and Confucian heritage. Its goals are predominantly shaped by the national imperative to ensure social stability and advance collective development.

3.1 Confucian Foundations and the „Exam-Oriented“ System

The legacy of Confucianism, with its emphasis on effort-based meritocracy, diligence, and education as a path to social mobility and moral refinement, remains potent [6]. The imperial civil service examination (Keju) system

finds its modern equivalent in the National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao). The Gaokao is not merely a test but a societal ritual that reinforces the collective spirit. A student's success brings honor to the entire family and local community, while failure is often perceived as letting the group down. This system creates a powerful, uniform goal for millions of students: excel in exams to serve the collective.

3.2 Collective Expectations and Social Pressure

The educational goals in China are heavily influenced by top-down national policies and intense familial expectations. Phrases like “winning at the starting line” reflect the collective anxiety and intense competition ingrained in the culture. The primary goal is to produce high-achieving students who can contribute to national economic growth and technological competitiveness, aligning with the broader national “China Dream” narrative. Consequently, success is quantitatively measured by test scores and admission rates to elite universities.

3.3 Conduct a thorough analysis of specific cultural resistance encountered during the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy,

The recent “double reduction” policy, which aims to reduce homework burden and off-campus tutoring, presents a fascinating case of state-led intervention to mitigate the excesses of the exam-oriented system [7]. It represents an official acknowledgment of the individual costs of collectivist-driven education, such as student burnout and mental health issues. However, its implementation struggles against the deeply ingrained cultural values of competition and academic elitism, demonstrating the enduring tension between evolving state goals and persistent societal beliefs.

4. The Cultural Logic of Educational Goals in Finland (Individualist Context)

The Finnish education model is a testament to its individualist and egalitarian social ethos. Its goals are centered on nurturing each individual's potential within a framework of trust and equality.

4.1 Egalitarianism and the „Trust-Based“ System

Finnish educational philosophy is built on the principle of equal opportunity for all, regardless of socioeconomic background. This is achieved through policies like the comprehensive school system (peruskoulu), which avoids

tracking until upper secondary level, and the deliberate absence of standardized high-stakes testing [3]. The system operates on a foundation of high trust: trust in municipalities, schools, teachers, and ultimately, students. This decentralization reflects the individualist value of autonomy.

4.2 Defining Success: Well-being and Competence

The fundamental goal of Finnish education is not to produce the “best” students in a competitive sense, but to support the development of competent, happy, and responsible individuals who can contribute to a democratic society. The curriculum emphasizes not just academic skills, but the development of transversal competencies (e.g., critical thinking, learning-to-learn, cultural competence). Success is qualitatively measured by student engagement, well-being, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations.

4.3 Teacher Professionalism and Student Autonomy

In Finland, the role of the teacher is crucial. Highly qualified and autonomous teachers act as “learning facilitators” rather than authoritarian instructors. They are trusted to design their own assessments and tailor pedagogy to meet the needs of their individual students [8]. This professional autonomy mirrors the value placed on individual expertise. Similarly, students are granted significant autonomy over their learning, fostering a sense of intrinsic motivation and personal responsibility—a core tenet of individualism.

5. Comparative Analysis: Conflict, Contrast, and Convergence

This section synthesizes the analyses of China and Finland to explicitly contrast how their core cultural values manifest in diametrically opposed educational goals and outcomes, while also noting potential points of convergence.

5.1 The Central Conflict: Collective Achievement vs. Individual Well-being

The primary conflict lies in the definition of success. China’s system, while highly effective in producing top-tier academic achievers, does so at a documented cost to individual student well-being, creativity, and psychological health [2]. Conversely, Finland’s system prioritizes individual well-being and holistic development while still achieving high academic outcomes, suggesting that

well-being and achievement are not a zero-sum game but can be mutually reinforcing [3].

5.2 Potential Convergence and Unanswered Questions

Despite these contrasts, China’s “double reduction” policy reveals a state-driven desire to incorporate elements reminiscent of the Finnish model, such as reducing student stress and fostering broader competencies. However, this reform clashes with the deeply embedded cultural value of collectivist competition. This raises a critical question: Can policy reforms successfully import educational goals that are in tension with a nation’s dominant cultural values? The current situation in China suggests that sustainable change requires a gradual shift in societal values, not just top-down policy mandates.

6. Research Gap and Future Directions

This review has synthesized existing literature to map the causal pathways between culture and educational goals in China and Finland. However, several significant gaps in the research remain.

Lack of Longitudinal and Empirical Studies: While the theoretical links are well-established, there is a scarcity of longitudinal studies that track how educational reforms in China (e.g., “double reduction”) are impacting student outcomes and well-being over time. Furthermore, more empirical, mixed-methods research is needed to move beyond philosophical comparison to data-driven analysis.

The Nuance of “Hybrid” Models: Future research should investigate emerging “hybrid” models, particularly within China’s private and international school sectors, which attempt to blend collectivist discipline with individualist pedagogy. The successes and challenges of these models could provide valuable insights for broader systemic reforms.

Beyond the Nation-State: Much of the research treats “Chinese” and “Finnish” culture as monolithic. Future studies could benefit from a more nuanced analysis that considers sub-cultural variations, such as urban versus rural attitudes towards education within China, or the impact of increasing immigration on Finland’s homogenous cultural landscape.

The Role of Globalization: The pervasive influence of global educational trends (e.g., STEM, digital literacy) warrants further investigation. How do these global forces interact with and potentially reshape deeply held national cultural values and educational priorities?

Addressing these gaps would provide a more dynamic and complex understanding of the interplay between culture and education in an increasingly interconnected world.

7. Conclusion

This literature review has systematically demonstrated that the profound differences between the Chinese and Finnish education systems are not merely a matter of pedagogical preference but are fundamentally rooted in their respective collectivist and individualist cultural foundations. China's system, driven by Confucian values and the imperative of collective advancement, excels in achieving standardized academic excellence but often at the expense of individual student well-being. Finland's system, built on a foundation of egalitarianism and trust, prioritizes the development of the autonomous individual and proves that well-being and high academic achievement can be synergistic goals.

The comparative analysis underscores that educational goals are not easily transferable commodities; they are organic outgrowths of a nation's cultural history and social values. Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of comparative education by operationalizing Hofstede's cultural dimensions as an analytical lens to decipher the 'why' behind systemic differences, moving beyond descriptive accounts to expose the value-based logic driving educational objectives. Practically, it highlights that policy interventions, such as China's "double reduction" reform, must be designed with a deep understanding of the prevailing cultural schema to navigate implementation tensions and foster genuine, sustainable change.

The ongoing reforms in China highlight the immense difficulty of grafting individualist-oriented goals onto a collectivist-structured system. Ultimately, this review concludes that while nations can and should learn from each other's successes, any meaningful educational transformation must be thoughtfully adapted to align with the deep-seated cultural context of the society it aims to serve.

Looking forward, the critical task for researchers and policymakers lies not in seeking a single "best" model, but in fostering a dynamic, reflexive understanding of how educational goals evolve. Future inquiry should focus on the negotiation between global educational trends and local cultural values, and on designing adaptive systems that can nurture both collective responsibility and individual flourishing in an increasingly interconnected world. The future of education research lies in understanding the complex, culturally-grounded logic that gives each system its unique purpose and character.

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