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Exploring early childhood education in China: background, development and current issues

Explorando la educación de la primera infancia en China: antecedentes, desarrollo y problemas actuales

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Explorando la educación de la primera infancia en China: antecedentes, desarrollo y problemas actuales

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Abstract

China has put great efforts into developing early childhood education and care services. Since 2010 the policy priority has been to develop early childhood education services for 3–6-year-old children before school entry. Evidence of the rapid development of early childhood education in China can be seen in the impressive development of policy, the increase in public investment and the boom in kindergarten participation rates. The demand for qualified early childhood education practitioners is also increasing in China. Private kindergartens are playing a very important role in providing early childhood education services due to the lack of public services. Despite the great progress already made, the development of early childhood education in China is unbalanced and inadequate in terms of its regional and social disparities. There is a huge gap between advanced ideas and kindergarten practices. The consequences of the new two-child policy present a big challenge to the development of early childhood education, and these should be prepared for in advance in terms of providing “*sufficient*” early childhood education services, as well as “*high-quality*” services to young children and their families

Resumen

China ha realizado grandes esfuerzos para desarrollar servicios de educación y cuidado de la primera infancia. Desde 2010, la prioridad política ha sido desarrollar servicios de educación infantil temprana para niños de 3 a 6 años antes de acceder a la escuela. La evidencia del rápido desarrollo de la educación de la primera infancia en China se puede apreciar en el sorprendente desarrollo político, el aumento de la inversión pública y el auge de las tasas de inserción en los jardines de infancia. La demanda de profesionales calificados en educación infantil temprana está aumentando en China. Los jardines de infancia privados desempeñan un papel muy importante en la prestación de servicios de educación de la primera infancia debido a la falta de servicios públicos. A pesar del gran progreso realizado, el desarrollo de la educación de la primera infancia en China es inestable e inadecuada en términos de desigualdad regional y social. Hay una gran brecha entre las ideas avanzadas y las prácticas llevadas a cabo en el jardín de infancia. Además, la nueva política de dos hijos representa un gran desafío para el desarrollo de la educación de la primera infancia, ya que deben prepararse de antemano para proporcionar servicios de educación de la primera infancia “*suficientes*” y de “*alta calidad*” para los niños y sus familias

Keywords

Children; China; Early Childhood Education; Kindergarten; Policy

Palabras clave

Niños; China; Educación de la primera infancia; Jardín de infancia; Política

“Early childhood education is the beginning of lifelong learning. It is an important part of the national education system and an important part of the public social welfare”.
China State Council (2010a)

1. Introduction

With more and more children attending non-parental care and education services, early childhood education and care has become a political interest in many countries, as part of their strategy to promote their social welfare and education systems. With a population of over 1.37 billion, China faces many challenges in improving people’s well-being (World Bank, 2016). Early childhood education and care is one of those challenges.

China has put great efforts into developing early childhood education and care services, and the policy priority since 2010 has been to develop early childhood education services for 3–6-year-old children before school entry. This paper adopts the conceptual framework proposed by Qi and Melhuish (2017), who argue that the development of early childhood care and education in China was much influenced by its social-cultural, political and economic development; public needs and interests; and the influences of international development. Through the lenses of policy and practice development, we are drawing a picture of the development of early childhood education in China. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework of this paper.

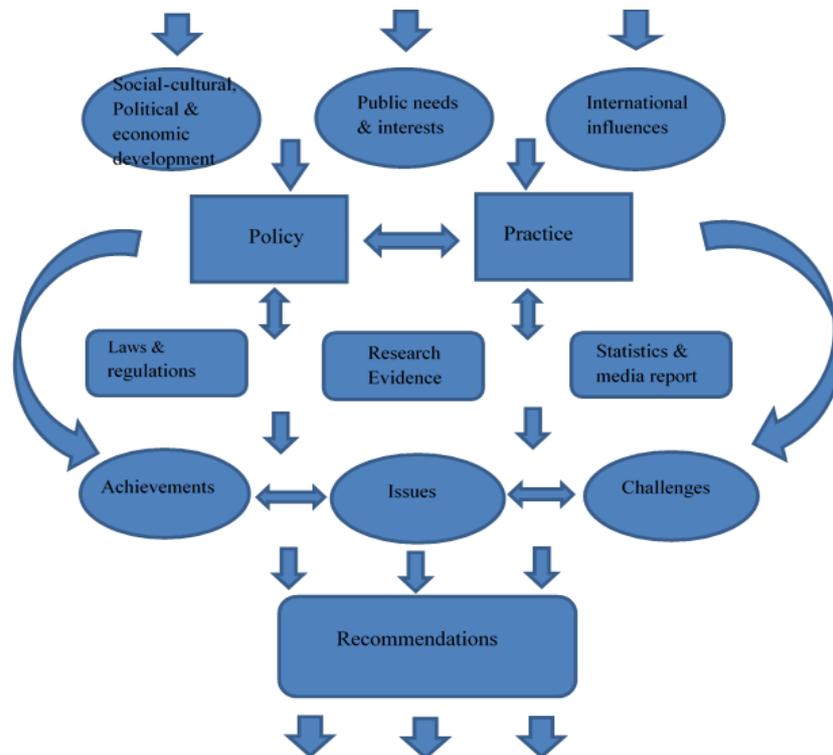


Figure 1. Analytical framework

The current section is structured as follows: the background information (including the notions, aims and principles; types, access and staffing) regarding early childhood education in China is introduced; policy and practice developments are explored in a historical context, as well as in the modern context; the challenges facing the development of early childhood education are explored, and the gaps between education ideas, policy and practice in kindergartens is discussed; the key facts of the development of early childhood education in China are highlighted at the end of the section.

2. Background information

2.1. Aims and principles

In this paper, early childhood education refers to the non-parental care and education services provided for children between the ages of 3 and 6, before their primary school entry. In China, kindergartens (You Er Yuan) are the main institutions that provide early childhood education services for children and their families; kindergartens can provide full-day, half-day, fixed-term, seasonal and boarding school services for children, and the above forms of services can be set either separately or mixed.

In the most recently released official document by MOE (Ministry of Education, 2016a), Kindergarten Work Regulations, it is stated that:

“Kindergartens are institutions for the care and education of preschool children over the age of 3 years. Kindergarten education is an important part of the basic education and it is the foundation stage of the school education system”.

The Regulations document also describes the two main tasks of kindergartens in China as being: 1) to implement the national education policy and to promote the harmonious physical and mental development of young children through care and education; and 2) to provide scientific parenting guidance to parents of young children. Furthermore, it defines the aims and purpose of kindergarten care and education in China as being to promote children’s well-being in terms of physical, intellectual and moral development, as well as their appreciation of aesthetics.

The key principles and requirements of kindergarten education in China are summarized as:

- education activities should follow the principles of children’s physical and mental development;
- activities should be age appropriate and recognize children’s individual differences;
- education activities should be organized through play-based activities and provide learning opportunities for all children.

Specifically, the importance of play has been highlighted (MOE, 2016a):

“Kindergartens shall regard play as an important form of comprehensive/all-round development education for young children. Kindergartens should create play conditions according to local conditions, provide rich and appropriate play materials, ensure adequate play time, and develop various types of play”.

2.2. Access, types and national plans

2.2.1. Access

Early childhood education has been defined as the basic or foundation stage of the education system in China. However, unlike countries such as the UK, France and Scandinavian countries, which provide universal preschool care services, early childhood education in China, which is from ages 3 to 6, is not part of compulsory education. Provision is patchy, and the government does not guarantee that all children at the appropriate age have equal access to kindergarten education before starting their primary school education. In the last few decades, public investment and attention to the development of early childhood education has increased, and access to kindergartens in China has been growing steadily (Figure 2).

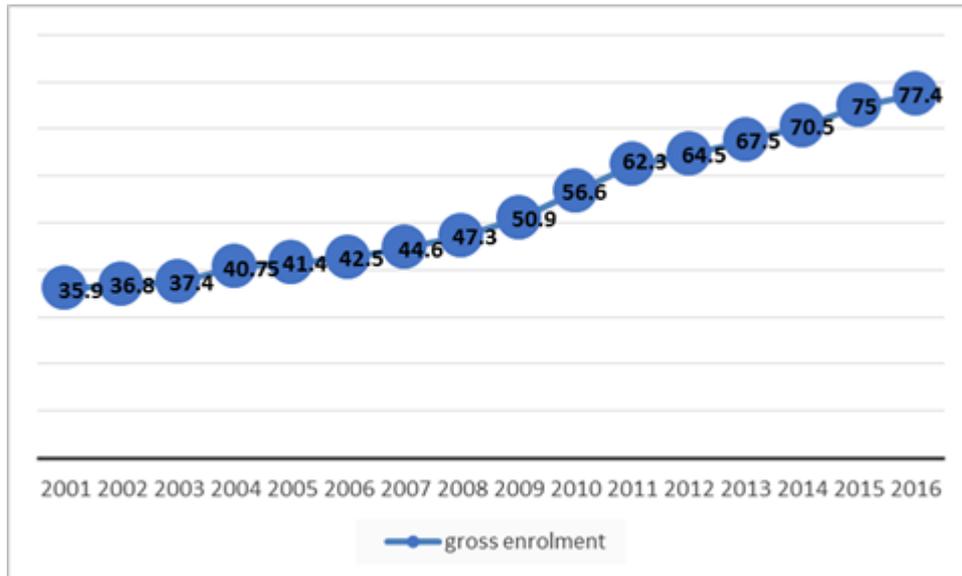


Figure 2. Percentage (%) of kindergarten provision participation for children aged 3 to 6 in China between 2001 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2001 and 2016

It was reported that the three-year kindergarten enrolment rate in China in 2016 reached 77.4% (MOE, 2017). Meanwhile, there were 44,138,630 children attending kindergartens in China in 2016 and the number of children in kindergartens has also increased steadily in the last decade (see Figure 3).

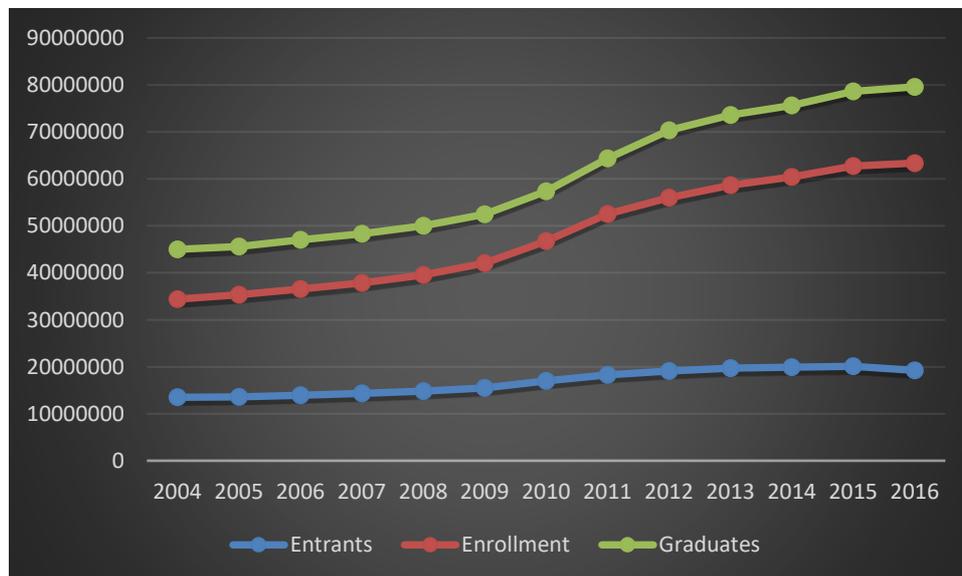


Figure 3. Number of children attending kindergartens in China between 2004 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2004 and 2016

2.2.2. Types

One contributing factor to increased kindergarten participation is the growing number of private kindergartens in China. There are two main types of kindergartens based on the funding sources. First are public kindergartens run by the Education Department, local communities, and the army

or the public institutions; second are private kindergartens, which include both for-profit and not-for-profit kindergartens. In 2016, there were 239, 812 kindergartens in China in total; 64% (154, 203) of them were registered as private kindergartens (including both non-profit and for-profit kindergartens), while the remaining kindergartens were registered as public kindergartens run by different departments and organizations (see Figure 4) (MOE, 2016b).

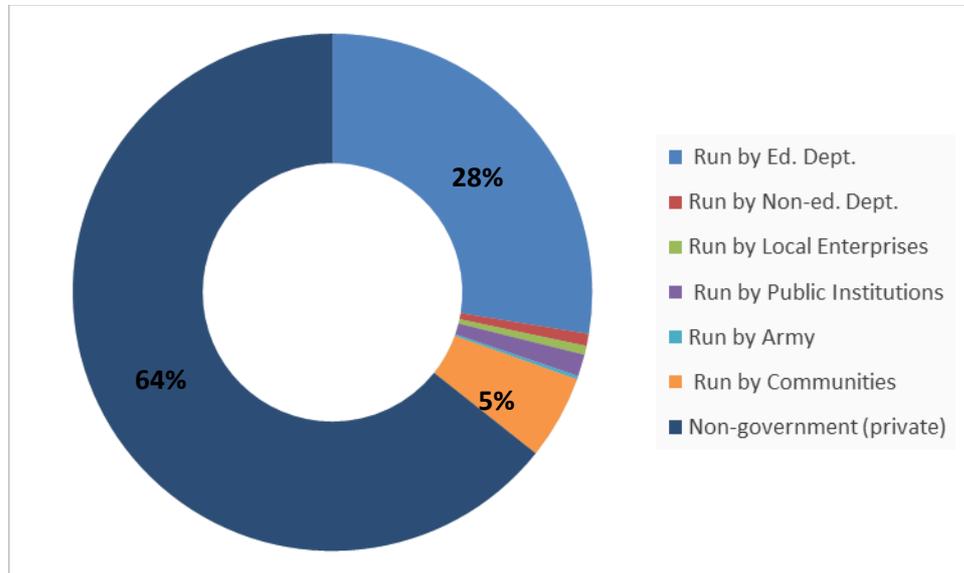


Figure 4. Number and types of kindergartens in China in 2016

Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) in 2016.

It can be seen in Figure 5 that the number of public kindergartens has been increasing steadily since 2010, alongside the increase in private kindergartens, which results in an overall increase of kindergartens in China. However, there was a big drop in the number of public kindergartens in China in the years 2000 and 2001 due to the reduced number of community-run kindergartens (Zhou, 2011). Because of the one-child policy and the economic reform of late 1990s that reconstructed state-owned factories, many factories and community-run kindergartens were shut down. Consequently, the number of public kindergartens has been dramatically reduced. Furthermore, comparing the number of private kindergartens between the rural, urban, and town and county areas in China since 2005 (Figure 6), it was found that private kindergartens are the large majority across all areas, but for the rural areas, the private–public gap has been narrowing since 2010, in line with the government’s strategy to promote accessibility by investing more in public kindergarten expansion programs in rural China.

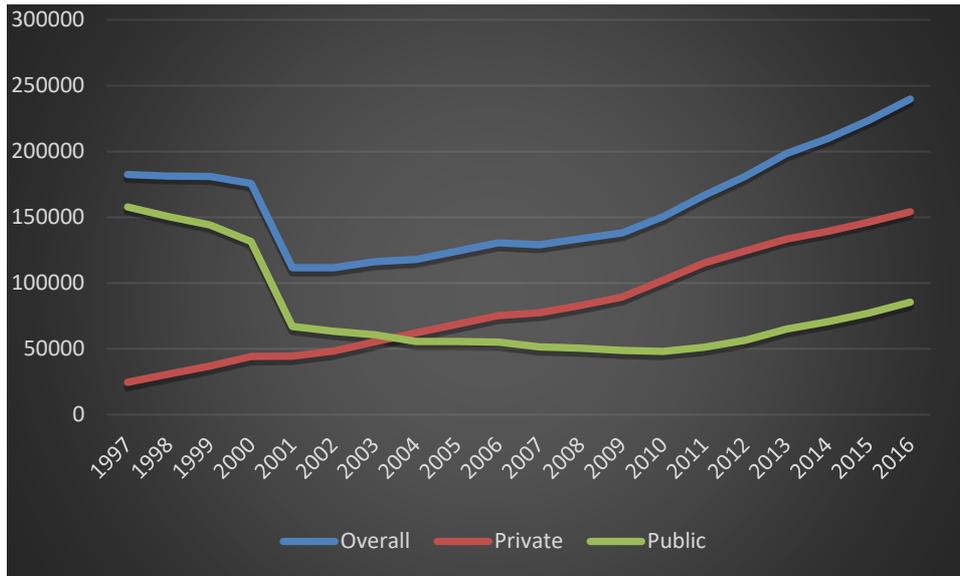


Figure 5. Number of overall, private and non-private kindergartens in China between 1997 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 1997 and 2016.

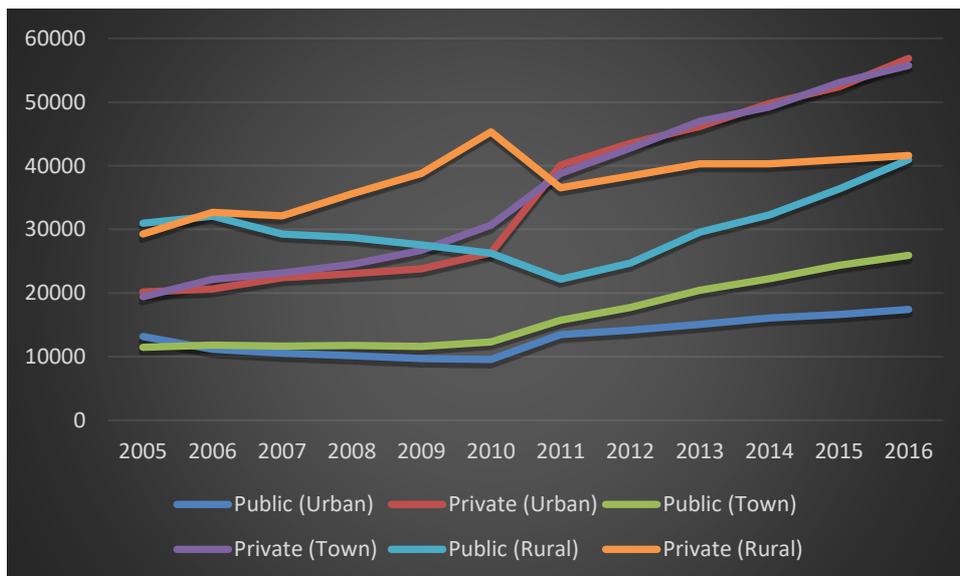


Figure 6. Number of private and non-private kindergartens in urban and rural areas in China between 2005 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2005 and 2016.

Since the publication of the *Law on Promoting Private Education* in 2016 (National People's Congress Standing Committee of China, 2016), private stakeholders in the education sector in China can choose to register their school either as a "private, non-profit organization" or as a "private, for-profit organization" that can make profits from the non-compulsory education sectors. In the official policy document *Private Education Promotion Act (MOE, 2004)*, it explains the definitions and key features of private education in China as

"The private education sector is part of the public welfare and is an integral part of the education system in a socialist society. The state's policies are encouraging, supporting, guiding and managing the private education according to the Constitution and Education law".

“Private schools have the same legal status as public schools. The state guarantees the private stakeholders’ autonomy of running schools. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the organizers, principals, teaching staff and educators of private schools”.

“The organizers of private schools may independently choose to establish non-profit or for-profit private schools. However, profit-oriented private schools cannot be established in the compulsory education sector”.

The change of “*tone*” towards private education also reflects the Chinese government’s policy of encouraging private investment in non-compulsory education sectors, including the early childhood education sector, to promote the reform and development of the education system in China.

2.2.3. National plans

Promoting the accessibility of early childhood education services has been one of the policy foci for Chinese government since 2010 as part of the strategy to develop and reform the education system in China. It was specified in the policy document, *The Outline of National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plans (2010–2020)* (China State Council, 2010b), that China aims to provide “*one-year universal early childhood education*” by 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1.
Outline of kindergarten enrolment rates until 2020

Index	Units	2009	2015	2020
Early Childhood Education				
Number of children in kindergartens	10,000	2,658	3,400	4,000
One-year Kindergarten enrolment rate	%	74.0	85.0	95.0
Two-year Kindergarten enrolment rate	%	65.0	70.0	80.0
Three-year kindergarten enrolment rate	%	50.9	60.0	70.0

In the recently released policy document, *Opinions on the Implementation of the Third Preschool Education Action Plan*, it is highlighted again that

“By 2020, China will build up a public early childhood education service system; the national gross enrolment rate of three-year kindergarten will reach 85%, and the ratio of public kindergartens and the non-profit private kindergartens (that serve for public welfare benefits) to the total number of kindergartens will reach 80%” (MOE, 2017).

In achieving such targets, the Chinese government needs to focus on strengthening kindergarten capacity in areas affected by poverty, and areas affected by the two-child policy, as well as the urban–rural transition areas.

2.3. Staffing in kindergartens

Kindergarten staff are teachers, childcare workers, health-care staff, administrative staff, teaching assistants and other workers. According to national education statistics in 2016 (MOE, 2016c), there were 3,817,830 staff working in kindergartens. While full-time teachers are the largest group of early childhood education professionals (58%) among all kindergarten staff in China, childcare workers are the second largest group of professionals and the ratio to all kindergarten staff reached 19% in 2016 (see Figure 7). Alongside increasing kindergarten enrolment, there was a significant rise in the number of kindergarten teachers over the last decade (see Figure 8).

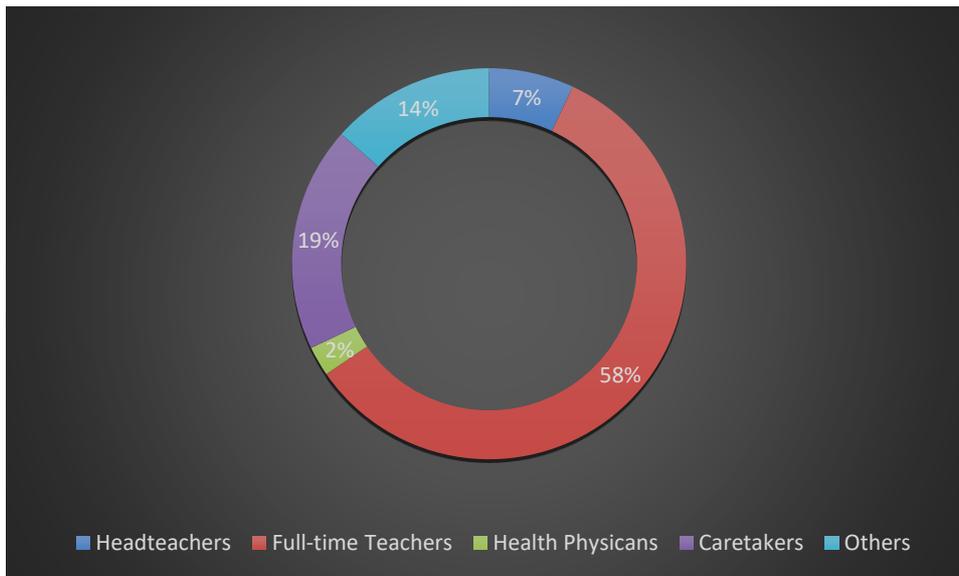


Figure 7. Percentage (%) of head teachers, teachers and other staff working in kindergartens in 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) in 2016.

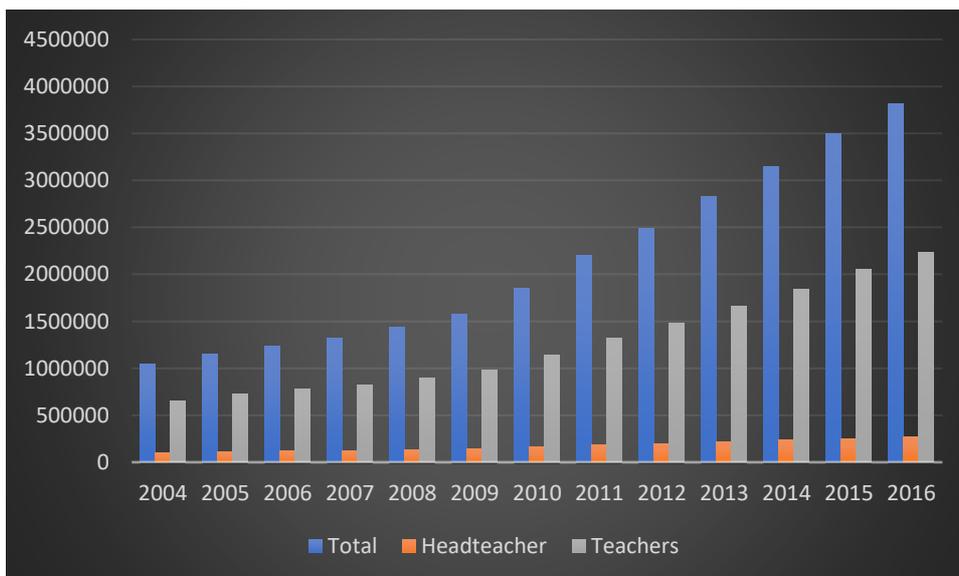


Figure 8. Number of kindergarten teachers (including head teachers and teachers) between 2004 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2004 and 2016.

It is well documented in many Chinese official regulations that Kindergartens should be equipped with staff in accordance with the type of service to be provided, and with a staff-child ratio that can meet the basic needs of care and education for young children (MOE, 2013). kindergarten head teachers, teachers, childcare workers and health workers (as well as other staff working in kindergartens) should meet certain basic educational and professional qualification requirements (MOE, 1996; 2012a).

The demand for qualified early childhood education practitioners is also increasing in China. The qualifications of kindergarten head teachers and teachers have steadily risen in the last decade in terms of degree-level education, certificate-level education and professional training. Figure 9 demonstrates that more and more kindergarten teachers have an associate degree (three-year-college) or an undergraduate degree over the last decade.

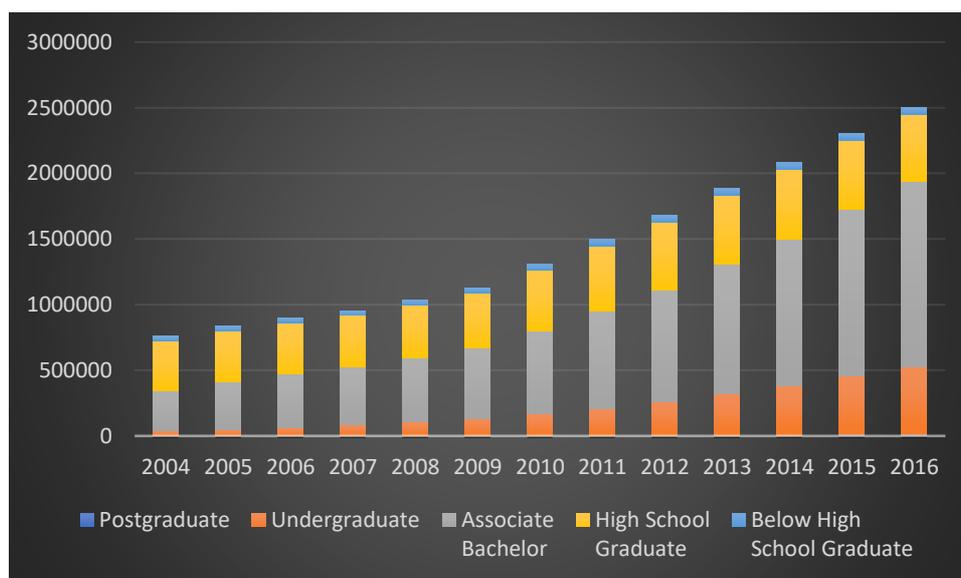


Figure 9. Breakdown of Kindergarten teachers' education Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2004 and 2016. Source: Based on China National statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2004 and 2016.

In response to the national plan to promote the development of early childhood education, the China State Council (2010a) released *Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education* and highlighted the top ten issues concerning the development of early childhood education in China, which included strengthening the teaching capacity. Soon after that, *Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards* (MOE, 2012a) were issued, clarifying the basic principles, professional standards and requirements for kindergarten teachers:

“The professional ethics, professional knowledge and professional skills are taken as the basic qualities and conditions for kindergarten teachers. Special emphasis is placed on the professional ideology and the ethics of teachers, which are the soul and core of the “Professional Standards”. The “Professional Standards” emphasized that qualified kindergarten teachers must be caring, responsible, patient and attentive. They must care for young children, respect young children and be responsible for the healthy growth of young children”.

Despite the remarkable progress in the last decade, the shortage of kindergarten teachers, the lack of highly qualified teachers and the low social status of early childhood education professionals and the high turn-over rate in the workforce are still key barriers to the healthy development of early childhood education in China (MOE, 2015). The central government has also recognized the issue and key strategies have been proposed including:

- Establish a group of kindergarten teachers' education colleges and universities, support higher education institutions (normal universities) to set up early childhood education majors/courses, and to educate high-quality kindergarten teachers who are devoted to early childhood education, good at childcare and education, and always care children and put children first.
- Innovate the kindergarten teacher education and training model, advance the training starting point, and develop the five-year teachers training/education programs of junior high school graduates. Optimize the kindergarten teacher training curriculum system, highlight the integration of care and education, scientifically establish courses of child development, childcare and education activities, strengthen practice-based courses, and cultivate the comprehensive ability of university students.

- A kindergarten teacher professional training system should be established to effectively improve kindergarten teachers' scientific care and education ability. Increase the professional training of kindergarten head teachers, rural kindergarten teachers, and non-governmental or private kindergarten teachers.
- The innovative kindergarten teacher training model relies on higher education institutions and kindergartens and focuses on training kindergarten teachers in a combination of centralized training and in-service practice training. Teachers' education/training colleges and Universities, as well as kindergartens are encouraged to work together (in partners) to establish kindergarten teacher education and training hubs.

Central Committee of the Communist Party and State Council of China, 2018

3. Policies and practices development

3.1. A historical review

The modern early childhood education development in China can be traced back to early 1900s when the first formal public kindergarten in China was built in 1903 by the then governor Duanfang in Hubei province. The kindergarten employed a Japanese headmaster and teachers, and the curriculum was much influenced by the Japanese tradition. From Japanese influences in the 1900s to John Dewey's influence between 1920 and 1930, and then the influence of the Soviet Union after the 1950s, the development of early childhood education in China has been a process of experimenting with different social, educational and philosophical frameworks imported from other cultures (Qi and Melhuish, 2017).

3.1.1. 1980s–2000s: education reform

The economic reform and opening-up of policy in the 1980s brought in a new era of development in China. Two important policy documents – the “*Kindergarten Work Regulations (Trial)*” and the “*Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens*” – were issued by the State Education Committee (now MOE, 1989a, 1989b), which laid the basis for legislation for early childhood education in China.

As the result of early childhood education reform after the 1980s, the “*Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial basis)*” was published to provide guidance for kindergarten practitioners in implementing progressive ideas (MOE, 2001). They emphasized that children's experiences and individual differences should be recognized and respected. Early childhood education should be a collaborative activity that engages teachers and parents as well as communities.

To further the progress of reform, China State Council (2003) published an instructive policy document *Opinions from the Development (Units) including the Ministry of Education on Innovations and Development of Early Childhood Education*. It was expected that there would be big steps in enforcing policies and principles into practice at provincial, regional and local levels (Corter, Janmohammed, Zhang, and Bertrand, 2006).

3.1.2. From the 2010s: a new era and the ongoing reform

As part of the national strategies on the construction of a harmonious society, China State Council (2010b) announced the national plans and goals for early childhood development. It also called for the strengthening of early education provision in rural areas. To better implement the national plans, *Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education* was published (China State Council, 2010a), and for the first time, early childhood education was recognized as an important index of people's well-being in China (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Top ten principles for the development of early childhood education in China

1. The development of early childhood education should be given a more important position.
2. Expanding early childhood education resources in a variety of ways.
3. Strengthening the building of teachers' capacity in various ways.
4. Increasing investment in early childhood education services.
5. Strengthening the management of kindergarten enrolment.
6. Strengthening the kindergarten security issue monitoring and supervision;
7. Regulating kindergarten fee management.
8. Applying scientific care and education to improve children's healthy development.
9. Improving the working mechanism and strengthening organizational leadership.
10. Planning and implementing a three-year Action Plan in developing early childhood education

Source: *Issues regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education* (China State Council, 2010a).

Later, the Ministry of Finance of China (2011) published *Issues on Increasing Financial Investment and Support in Early Childhood Education Development*, highlighting the urgency of increasing investment from the government. To keep up with this policy progress, the new *Kindergarten Work Regulations* (MOE, 2016a) were released to replace the ones introduced in the 1990s. This is the most important policy document regarding the development of early childhood education in China; it was designed under the Education Law and regulates all other policy documents, as well as kindergarten practice.

3.2. Curriculum reform

3.2.1. Understanding the role of play in curriculum

Early childhood education curriculum reform has been part of the education reform process since the 1980s and recognizing the role of play in the kindergarten curriculum has been one of the core concepts in the process of early childhood education reform.

In the earlier stages of early childhood education reform in the 1980s and 1990s, Piaget's child development theory, as well as other theories, such as "*activity theory*", "*ecological systems theory*" and theories of children's play, had important roles. In the late 1990s, theoretical ideas, such as the "*zone of proximal development*", the "*Reggio Emilia approach*" and the "*project approach*" were recognized and became influential in developing the early childhood education curriculum (Wang, 2004). Other theories, such as "*action theory*", "*ecological system theory*", and "*emotional intelligence theory*", as well as some theories on children's play, also played an important role at that time.

Under such circumstance, the spirit of curriculum reform was that the curriculum should be integrated and should emphasized interactions between children and environments. Children's play and daily activities were important for their development, and thus should be valued in the kindergarten curriculum.

Since the education reform, most of kindergarten educators have made great efforts and been encouraged to overcome the problems of heavily "*teacher-centered*" pedagogy. However, many teachers were very much influenced by the deep-rooted approaches to teaching, and their judgements on play in the early childhood education curriculum can be divided into three types of opinions (Wang, 2017):

- The first opinion is to separate play and teaching and learning activities, and regard play, teaching and learning as the two ends of the kindergarten education axis.
- The second is to separate children's free play from the play activities in teaching, thinking that children's play is the "*free play*" and the play activities in teaching is "*classroom teaching*".

- The third is to separate children's pleasure from children's development. It is believed that children's independent and free play can only be based on pleasure, and therefore children's learning and development should not be emphasized.

This kind of dualism affects early childhood education practice and limits the enthusiasm and creativity of kindergarten teachers in encouraging children's play.

3.2.2. High-structured approaches to teaching and learning

The high-structured approach to teaching and learning has been used in Chinese kindergartens for a long time and it is still dominant in kindergarten provisions nowadays. Table 3 presents a typical daily activities schedule in Chinese kindergartens.

Table 3.

Daily Activities Schedule in X kindergarten for Autumn and Winter Terms (Age group: 4-5)

Time	Activities
7:45-8:00	Reception activities
8:00-9:00	Free play; Milk and Snacks
9:00-10:00	Morning exercise
10:00-11:00	Collective teaching activities; 10 Minutes break
11:00-11:15	Pre-lunch activities
11:15-12:00	Lunch and after-lunch walk
12:00-14:00	Mid-day nap
14:00-14:35	Mid-day exercise
14:35-15:00	Snacks
15:00-15:50	Collective teaching activities
15:50-16:00	Life course
16:00-16:45	End of the day activities
16:45-17:30	Preparation for leaving; After school classes

Liu and Feng (2005) concluded that curriculum reform since 2000s had promoted three main ideas: respecting children, active learning and play-based teaching and learning. The 2001 Guidelines specified kindergarten educational content in five main domains (Health, Science, Language, Arts and Social Studies), and highlighted play as the basic form of education in kindergarten provisions (MOE, 2001).

Early childhood education educators and practitioners are encouraged to embrace the ideas that:

- children's experiences are important, and children can develop their cognitive abilities while interacting with their environment;
- the social and cultural environment is important for children's development, and cooperative activities should be valued;
- children's engagement in activities and interactions with environments are important for their learning and development, and their own interests should be valued; and
- children have multiple intelligences, and creative ability and imagination are important for children's development and thus the ability should be valued and cultivated in the kindergarten curriculum.

However, there appear to be considerable gaps between progressive ideas and daily practices in kindergartens. It has been criticized that teacher-directed collective teaching activities are dominant in Chinese kindergartens: many kindergartens are teaching primary school curricula contents heavily such as Chinese Pinyin, English, and Literacy in advance to prepare children for school; Kindergartens are conducting intensive training of knowledge and skills by means of mechanical reciting, memory, transcription, and calculation; there is a failure to create an age-appropriate learning environment for children and there is not enough play materials and

resources, and the educational environment cannot stimulates children's interest in learning and exploration, physical fitness, and free play (Qi, 2015; MOE, 2018a).

The Chinese Government has made some efforts to deal with this issue through the publication of non-statutory document-*Early Learning and Development Guideline: Age 3–6* (MOE, 2012b). It aims to help kindergarten teachers and care workers, as well as parents, to understand children's learning and development, to establish reasonable expectations for the development of young children, and to apply the scientific care and education which allows children to have a happy and meaningful childhood.

It describes children's learning and development in five different areas (health, science, language, social studies and arts), and indicates developmental goals for children in different ages groups (3–4, 4–5 and 5–6), with respective guidance. It lays out four guiding principles as being: 1) pay attention to the integrity of children's learning and development. 2) respect the individual differences in early childhood development. 3) understand the learning style and characteristics of young children. And 4) value the importance of the learning quality of young children. The spirit of this document has been widely spread in the country through professional training with aims to implement advanced educational concepts and scientific educational methods in all aspects of kindergarten education.

3.3. Issues and Challenges

3.3.1. Current issues

China has made great efforts in improving early childhood education and the public and political profile of early childhood education in China now is much stronger than ever. Since 2012, led by the Ministry of Education, the “*Early Childhood Education Publicity Month*” event has been arranged to raise the public awareness of early childhood education and care development in China. Each year, there is a specific focus which reflexes the issues, challenges and development of early childhood education and care in China. For example, the theme of the 2018 “*Early Childhood Education Publicity Month*” is “*I am a kindergarten teacher*” (MOE, 2018b). It aims to help the society and parents to understand the characteristics of kindergarten education, to understand the professionalism of kindergarten teachers, and to shape the new images of kindergarten teachers as being “*love their jobs, work diligently and positively*”. It also aims to create a caring and professional learning environment for kindergarten teachers to support the development of early childhood education. This year's theme aims to address the issue that kindergarten teachers' public profiles have been misrepresented and damaged by child abuse scandals happened in kindergartens that caused huge tensions between parents and kindergarten professionals.

Qi and Melhuish (2017) identified three major challenges facing early childhood education development in China as being 1) the imbalanced development of early childhood education between regions in terms of its quantity, quality and resources; 2) the clashes between Western ideas and philosophy and the traditional Chinese cultures and values in early childhood education; and 3) the inadequate policy and practice development of early childhood education and care service for children under age 3.

In line with these arguments, this paper further discusses a new challenge facing early childhood education development in China after the implementation of the new two-child policy since 2015.

3.4. The new challenge: implementation of two-child policy

The adjustment of the two-child policy is a new challenge to the development of early childhood education in China. Coming into effect in January 2016, China's new universal two-child policy was the culmination of years of loosening its family planning laws. The Chinese government was hoping for a boom in second children when it announced the lifting of the controversial “*one-child policy*” – in October 2015. According to a senior family planning official (Juan, 2016), the universal

two-child policy is expected to add more than 30 million people to China's working-age population by 2050, helping the nation to curb a looming labor shortage.

China's National Health and Family Planning Commission (2017) reported that 17.86 million children were born in 2016 – an increase of 1.31 million from 2015 – and that nearly half of the children born were second children. In Shandong Province, for example, around 1.78 million children were born in 2016, an increase of half a million from 2015, and 63.3% were second children (Dai and Zhang, 2017). Public demand for social welfare, public health and education resources is increasing as a result of the implementation of the new two-child policy. It presents a great challenge to the development of early childhood education in China in terms of expanding kindergartens to meet public demand and providing adequate resources and well-trained kindergarten teachers for all expanded provisions in the future.

According to the official predicted future population of China, by the year 2020, 4.31 million children will reach the age of kindergarten admission; consequently, 290,000 teachers and 140,000 childcare workers will be needed in kindergartens (China National Health Planning Commission, 2017). Bearing this in mind, there will be a huge demand for kindergarten teachers and childcare workers, “a total of 1.9 million”, as the Head of the Ministry of Education estimates. However, there is also concern that the “baby boom” is not as big as the Chinese officials expected and in fact the recently released report indicates a 3.5% birth rate decline in 2017 compared to 2016, accompanied by a record-low number of babies born as their family's first child (ChinaDaily, 2018).

The Head of the Ministry of Education acknowledged at a recent press conference that, “*The pace of kindergarten development and teacher training should be accelerated, and preparations must be made to meet the upcoming peak of kindergarten admissions to ensure that there are enough kindergartens and qualified teachers to meet the public needs*” (National People's Congress of China, 2018). In summary, the consequences of the new two-child policy present a big challenge to the development of early childhood education in China, and these should be prepared for in advance in terms of providing “sufficient” early childhood education services, as well as “high-quality” services to young children and their families.

4. Conclusion

The development of early childhood education in China has experienced great changes both in policy and practice. In a historical context, the development of early childhood education in China has been a process of experimenting with different social, educational and philosophical frameworks imported from other cultures (Qi and Melhuish, 2017). Evidence of the rapid development of early childhood education in China since the 1980s can be seen in the impressive development of policy, the increase in public investment and the boom in kindergarten participation rates. From the earlier view that early childhood education is a preparatory stage for school to the latest view that it provides the basis for optimal child development and well-being, early childhood education has undergone great progress in China. China still faces enormous challenges in the development of early childhood education. The development is unbalanced and inadequate in terms of its regional and social disparities and a strategy needs to be developed to address the issues of inequality between the regions. There are gaps between advanced ideas, policies and kindergarten practice. Formulating legislative frameworks that provide a legal basis for implementing policy regulations and guaranteeing financial investments from all government levels should also be prioritized in policy development in China. Private kindergartens are now playing a very important role in providing early childhood education services due to the lack of public services and a strategy needs to be developed to harmonize the private and public sectors. The consequences of the new two-child policy present a big challenge to the development of early childhood education. It is advised that at the government level, the consequences of two-child policy on the development of early childhood education should be scientifically predicted, and the development should be carefully planned, and actively responded to through policy adjustment.

5. References

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