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Early childhood education and care in China: history, current trends and challenges

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Early childhood education and care in China: history, current trends and challenges

This paper reviews the development of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in China. The historical context from 1900 is summarised, and then developments from the 1980s up to the present kindergarten expansion movement, starting in 2010, are covered in detail. The review shows that ECEC development in China has undergone great changes both in policy and practice. The clash between progressive ideas and existing kindergarten practices has been and remains a challenge. The ‘cultural appropriateness issue’ is of concern, and there are strong voices for keeping valuable aspects of Chinese traditional culture. China has put great efforts recently into boosting kindergarten participation nationwide, yet there have been and remain great social economic disparities at various levels. There is also growing concern that the programme quality cannot be maintained with the rapid kindergarten expansion process. Policy development for the childcare sector (0-3) in China is relatively thin compared to recent booms for kindergartens.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care; policy and practice; China; challenge

China has been experiencing rapid economic and social changes in the decades since the 1980s. As the world's most populous country with a population of over 1.35 billion, China is still a developing country and faces many challenges in improving people's wellbeing (World Bank 2014). Early childhood education and care (ECEC), which is considered to be a way of improving children's wellbeing, is one of those challenges. Unlike countries such as the UK, France and Scandinavian countries, which provide universal preschool care services, preschool education (3 to 6 years) in China is not part of the universal education system, with patchy provision and childcare services (0 to 3 years) which are less than adequate. This paper reviews the development of ECEC in China. The historical context from 1900 is summarised, and then developments from the 1980s up to the present kindergarten expansion movement, which began in 2010, are covered in detail. The changes in policies, kindergarten curriculum and practices, as well as the challenges faced are put into context.

The conceptual framework for this paper rests on ideas that ECEC development in China were much influenced by 1) its social, political, and economic development; 2) interests and demands of the public; and 3) international influences (Figure 1). Policy documents (including laws, regulations, and national development plans) are reviewed to demonstrate the policy development at important points in time. Research literature, media and press reports, as well as official statistics are reviewed to illustrate ECEC practice alongside the development of policy. Against this background, achievements and challenges facing ECEC development have been identified in respect of policy and practice development, as well as clashes between the ideas and the reality of ECEC development in China.

Historical Context

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. Later, in 1904, the first regulations regarding preschool education were introduced, mainly based on Japanese kindergarten regulations from 1900 (Tang and Feng 2003).

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, China was experiencing dramatic cultural and social changes. Under the influence of the ‘New Culture Movement’, Western education theories, such as those of John Dewey, Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori, were introduced, leading to national level reflections on traditional Chinese education ideology and practice in early childhood education. Many Chinese education scholars such as Tao, Xingzhi (1891-1946), Zhang, Xuemen (1891-1973) and Chen Heqin (1892-1982), initiated the ECEC curriculum experimental movement. They proposed the idea that the ECEC curriculum in China should be based on both Chinese kindergarten practices and learning from progressive Western educational ideas and they developed different curriculum models such as ‘Action Curriculum’ (by Zhang Xuemen), and ‘Wholeness or Units Pedagogy’ (by Chen Heqin) (Wang 2004).

In general, these curriculum reforms in the 1920s and 1930s were mainly influenced by Dewey’s ideas and emphasised child-centred philosophy and practice. Based on these curriculum experiments, the Ministry of Education (1932) issued ‘*Kindergarten Curriculum Standards*’ (revised in 1936), which was the first formal ECEC curriculum standard. It represented the end of a chaotic period for the ECEC curriculum in China; its influence lasted up to the late 1940s.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, ECEC experienced dramatic reform due to the change of political system to a socialist state. Under the supervision of experts from the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Education (MOE) (1952) issued '*Kindergarten Provisional Guidelines*' (*Trial draft*), emphasising a more teacher-centred pedagogy and advising teachers to instruct children in purposeful and planned activities. These guidelines played an important role in shaping early childhood education reform in China in the 1950s.

Early childhood education in China experienced tremendous growth between the 1950s and the 1960s. However, this growth only lasted until the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). All schools were then closed and early childhood education came under serious attack such that over this ten-year period only one teacher training school was left open (Tang and Feng 2003).

A brief overview of this short period reveals that, from Japanese influences in the 1900s to John Dewey's influences between 1920s-1930s and then the influence of the Soviet Union after the 1950s, ECEC development in China has been a process of experimenting with different social, educational and philosophical frameworks imported from other countries.

From the 1980s onwards

Policy Context

The 1980s was deemed the return of 'spring' for China's economy as the 'reform and opening up policy' brought in a new era of economic development. The provision of early childhood education, which had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, was also recovering and back on track. The State Education Committee (now Ministry of Education) (1989) issued the '*Kindergarten Work Regulations (Trial)*' and the

'Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens', which laid the basis for legislation for preschool education in China. These documents clarified the role of preschool education as the bedrock of the education system with the aims of caring for and educating children to prepare them for primary school. They also placed responsibility for implementation at the provincial, regional and local levels.

Although these documents set out basic principles, many kindergarten teachers struggled to follow these ideas in practice. In order to resolve these issues, the *'Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial basis)'* was published to provide guidance for kindergartens practitioners in implementing progressive ideas (MOE 2001). The Guidelines document was the result of early childhood education reform after the 1980s. 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'*. The document marked a big improvement, as it is a cooperative product involving various Departments, and the magnitude of ECEC development indicated in this document is well beyond what was suggested in the 2001 Guidelines (Corter, Janmohammed, Zhang, and Bertrand 2007).

Despite all those years of improvement in policy regulation, the number of public ECEC centres had been reduced dramatically (Zhou 2011). There was tension resulting from the decrease of public services with a corresponding increase in private services and an increasing demand for high quality, affordable ECEC services from the public. This issue aroused many public complaints and was reported widely in social media (People's Daily, February 4, A11 2009). Many scholars, who were also members of the annual National People's Congress (NPC) meeting and National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), suggested that the

Chinese government should take a leading role and encourage private investment and wider engagement from society in developing ECEC services (Liu 2010; Pang 2010).

The year 2010 became a year that ECEC development entered a new era in China. As part of the national strategies on the construction of a harmonious society, China State Council (2010) announced the '*National Plans for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*'. By 2020, according to these national plans, one-year of universal preschool education should be provided for all children, with most children having better access to two years of universal preschool education; and three --years of services should be accessible for children in developed areas, and childcare services should also be improved. It also called for the strengthening of early education provision in rural areas.

In order to better implement the national plans, China State Council (2010) published- '*Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education*' - and, for the first time, early childhood education was recognized as an important measure of people's wellbeing in China and ten principles for developing early childhood education were laid out. Soon after that, provincial governments issued a Three-Year action plan at the provincial level and each county in each province was required to develop a Three-Year plan based at county level. The policy in developing ECEC services in China was quickly implemented at provincial, regional and local levels.

Later, the Ministry of Finance (2011) published- '*Issues on increasing financial investment and support in early childhood education development*' -, highlighting the urgency of increasing investment from the government. To further the development of ECEC, a second round of Three-Year Action Plans (2014-2016) was initiated (MOE, 2014), identifying the main tasks as: 1) expanding kindergarten programmes; 2)

adjusting programme structures and strengthening kindergarten management mechanisms; and 3) improving the quality of services.

In order to keep up with this policy progress, the new '*Kindergarten Work Regulations*' was released to replace the one introduced in the 1990s (MOE 2016). It is the most important policy document regarding early childhood education in China, since it was designed under the Education law and regulates all other policy documents as well as kindergarten practice. Table 1 lists major policy documents relevant to ECEC development in China.

Insert Table 1 about here

Curriculum

Early childhood education curriculum reform has been part of the reform process since the 1980s. The 1981 document- '*Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial draft)*', specified the curriculum or teaching content in eight domains, and described development goals for children at different ages. Importantly, it recognized the role of play and advised teachers to integrate play, group activities, physical activities and other daily activities in order to fulfil educational goals. Also, as the 'one child' policy was introduced in the 1980s, the document emphasised the need for cooperation between kindergartens and families (MOE 1981).

In the earlier stages of ECEC reform in the 1980s and 1990s in China, Piaget's child development theory, as well as other theories such as 'action theory', 'ecological system theory', and theories of children's play, had important roles at that time. 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 ECEC curriculum in China (Wang 2004).

The 2001 Guidelines specified kindergarten educational content in five main domains (health, science, language, arts and social studies) and explained the practical advice for practitioners. They emphasised that children's experiences and individual differences should be recognized and respected; preschool education should be a collaborative activity that engages teachers, parents as well as communities. The Guidelines were soon in widespread use across the country and played a very important role in the reform of the kindergarten curriculum. Kindergartens have also been encouraged to develop their own curriculum such as the Integrated-Themed curriculum model employed in Shanghai (Shanghai Education Committee 2002).

These curricular reforms have not been without criticism. One major concern was the clash between advanced ideas and kindergarten practices. Professor Hua, who was a key figure in drafting the 2001 Guidelines, explained that the Guidelines borrowed ideas from abroad which were integrated under the concepts of '*respecting children*' and '*children's life-long learning*'. Hua pointed out that '*the success of the reform depends on teachers' understanding of how and why to teach children in the ways the Guidelines suggest*' (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa 2009). Kindergarten teachers in China have been used to teacher-centred practices for a very long time, and it was not easy for them to adapt to a child-centred curriculum (Li, Wang, and Wong 2011; Liu and Feng 2005). In short, there appear to be considerable gaps between progressive ideas and daily practices in kindergartens, and teachers in China face a number of challenges under the curriculum reforms.

Staffing and training

Staffing and staff training have long been great challenges in China. The 1989 document '*Regulations on...*' specified that kindergarten heads and teachers who had

not graduated from a teacher training school or vocational college would have to take the examination supervised by local education administration.

'Kindergarten Work Regulations' specified further the educational and qualification requirements: that kindergarten heads and teachers should hold teachers' certification, and the head teacher should also have relevant work experience and have completed the training credentials for Head teachers. In 2010, in response to the national plans, *'Issues regarding.....'* highlighted strengthening teaching capacity as one of the top ten issues. Soon after that, *'Kindergarten Teachers' Standards'* were released, clarifying the basic principles, professional standards and requirements for kindergarten teachers in China (MOE 1996, 2010, 2012).

In the meantime, national level in-service training programmes for kindergarten teachers were launched in 2012 and up until 2015, nearly all rural kindergartens in the less developed central and western regions in China were reported to be receiving national level in-service training (MOE 2015). This highlights the Chinese government's efforts in building teacher capacity in kindergartens, especially in less developed areas.

According to official statistics, the qualifications of kindergarten head teachers and teachers have undergone steady growth since the 1990s. The proportion of kindergarten heads and teachers with higher academic qualifications is rising (Figure 2). In 2001 less than one third (32%) of kindergarten heads and teachers had graduated with a 3-year college or 4-year university degree; by 2013, the proportion of teachers with a 3- or 4-year degree had reached 69.4%, while other teachers were either high school graduates or had lower qualifications (MOE 2001, 2013).

Examining these policy documents and statistics over the last few decades, it is clear that qualification requirements for ECEC practitioners in China are gradually

increasing. However, the extent to which these regulations and policies have influenced kindergarten practice or the reality of staffing in kindergartens in China has yet to be determined.

Group sizes and ratios

The required group sizes and staff-child ratios are specified in official documents (Table 2). Typically, a kindergarten classroom has two teaching staff and one care worker for 20-35 children. However, it has been reported that larger class sizes in kindergartens still exist (Dongfang Daily, January 19, A15 2012). It appears that kindergartens in rural areas are more likely to have larger class sizes due to reasons such as a shortage of kindergartens or lack of teaching staff. Many kindergartens in urban areas also have more children per classroom than the regulations specify due to the huge demand from parents for preschool places.

In the meantime, most of the kindergartens in China provide a full day service, meaning that teachers and care workers should usually work for the whole day. However, in some circumstances, teachers are sharing workloads so that one is present in the morning and the other in the afternoon (Liu and Li 2014). This means that the actual staff-child ratio in classrooms may not be the same as the registered staff-child ratio.

Quality issues

Currently China has no nationwide evaluation standard for early childhood education quality. There are provincial, city and local level evaluation or monitoring systems in many areas that also serve as a general reference for the practice of kindergarten education. However, it has been argued that these systems usually focus more on 'hardware' environmental features or the 'structural quality' of programmes and place

less emphasis on the ‘process indicators’ of quality that are very important but harder to assess (Corter et al. 2006; Wong and Pang 2002). These gaps were recognized in the 2010 document - ‘*Issues Regarding....*’ - which specified that one of the important issues concerning ECEC development is to establish an effective and scientific programme quality monitoring system in China.

With the combined efforts of the public and the Chinese government, participation in kindergartens has been growing steadily over the last decade (Figure 3). However, there remains a big concern that, in order to reach the attendance goals that were set in national plans (2010-2020), the size of classrooms might be getting bigger, and staff with lower qualifications might be recruited due to kindergarten expansion (Liu, Z. L. 2010; Hua 2014). In other words, the quality of preschool programmes might not be improved in the process of kindergarten expansion.

The Chinese government has made some efforts to deal with the issue with the publication of a non-statutory document- ‘*Early learning and development guideline: age 3 -6*’ (MOE 2012). The purpose of this document is to help kindergarten teachers, care workers as well as parents to understand children’s learning and development. It describes children’s learning and development in five different areas (health, science, language, social studies, and arts) and indicates developmental goals for children at different ages (3 to 4, 4 to 5 and 5 to 6 years) with respective guidance. The document has been disseminated nationwide and the principles stated in the guidance have been widely praised by experts as a means of developing successful preschool programmes in China. Experts have advised that the guidance should not be treated as a standard for measuring children’s learning and development and practitioners should respect individual differences in development (Li and Feng 2013). It is not yet clear how the

fidelity of implementation of the guidance can be guaranteed and how to ensure that it is not being used by practitioners or parents to judge children's progress.

Public and private programmes

Due to the consequences of the 'one child' policy and the economic system reform in China, the number of public preschool programmes has been reduced and the number of private programmes has increased phenomenally (Figure 4). In 2001, 40% of kindergartens in China were registered as private centres; by 2013 the proportion had risen to 67%. The relative share of private programmes in urban and town areas is larger than in rural areas in China, and they have both increased over time (Figure 5).

The dilemma

There are few empirical studies on whether public kindergartens can provide better service than private kindergartens in China. However, there are concerns that many private centres are 'profit-driven' or that some are lacking financial support and cannot guarantee basic quality requirements (e.g. with an emphasis on readiness for school to meet parents' expectations; low qualified staff and low-level safety environment); or some private services are too expensive for the general public (centres with sky-high prices) (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, March 8, 2011).

On the other hand, the public ECE services are less than adequate and, in some circumstances, high quality and affordable public centres are accessible only to certain groups. In Guangzhou City in 2012, it was reported that 10 public preschool centres, which are providing services only for people working in city government departments, received as much as 105 million RMB per year from public funds, whereas the number of kindergartens in Guangzhou totalled 1,532 and only 305 million funds were planned in ECEC development in 2012 (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, January 11, 2012).

The case in Guangzhou, however, is not unique. It has long been a criticism of the situation in China that the lack of accessible public preschool services, alongside the lack of affordable and high quality private services, is causing widespread inequality in early childhood education development (Cai and Feng 2004). Nonetheless, the private ECE programmes in China are playing a very important role in providing ECEC services due to the lack of public services. The Chinese government also encourages private investment. New regulations are needed in managing and evaluating the private ECE programmes and the government has been urged to provide more financial and policy support to the private ECE services (Pang 2014).

Overall, evidence of the rapid ECEC development 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 preschool education is a preparatory stage for school, to the latest view that it provides the basis for optimal child development and wellbeing, both the Chinese government and the general public are now taking ECEC development more seriously than ever.

Challenges

Despite the remarkable progress, there have been and remain huge challenges such as the rural-urban disparities, the cultural appropriateness issue, and the under-development of 0-3 childcare services.

Urban-rural disparities

It has been frequently acknowledged by the Chinese government that ECEC development in rural areas is far behind that in urban areas and it has been a challenge to achieve national plans for ECEC development and reform.

At policy level, the central, provincial and local level ECEC policies all include plans to reduce regional disparities; however, the lower targets in rural areas for ECEC access, for staff quality, and for formal centred based programmes may lead to policies not being achieved. The State Council document - '*National plans...*' specified development goals for those regional areas 'ready' to provide universal three year preschool programmes by 2020 (meaning urban areas or cities), whereas the specification for less developed areas was only one year. Provincial and local level governments also set development goals based on 'local situations', with the targets for developed areas and urban cities higher than those for less developed and rural areas.

At provision level, the urban-rural areas disparity can be seen in terms of service accessibility, facilities and resource availability, as well as teachers' capacity. In 2007, preschool attendance in rural China was only 35.6%, while the national average rate was 44.6% and the rate in urban China was 55.6% (Pang 2010). The three-year preschool attendance rate in rural China is much lower than in urban areas, and particularly lower than in large cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai, which generally have preschool attendance rates above 90%.

The quality and environment of preschool education in rural and urban areas can also be very different. Kindergarten teachers' qualifications were much lower in rural areas. In 2001, the majority (84%) of teachers in rural areas were only high school graduates or below, while the remaining 16% had a 3-year college training. In urban areas, 43% of kindergarten teachers had 3- or 4-year degrees. The qualification gap has been decreasing over years. In 2012, in urban areas, almost three quarters of teachers (74%) had a 3- or 4-year degree, while in rural areas, only half the teachers had a 3-year degree or above (MOE 2001, 2012). Furthermore, the rural preschool centres had a less formal curriculum and less adequate learning materials compared to counterparts in

urban areas. In 2013, rural kindergartens owned around 93 volumes of books and 11 GB digital resources per classroom, while urban kindergartens owned 2.3 times more books, and nearly five times more digital resources (n=50GB) per classroom (MOE 2013).

Despite the fact that the level of books and digital resources owned by both rural and urban kindergartens has increased phenomenally over the years, the gap remains huge (Figure 6).

In order to narrow the regional disparities, the central government has increased investment in rural areas and western regions. Between 2010 and 2013, the central government invested 50 Billion RMB mainly for kindergarten expansion programmes in rural China, especially in western areas. However, in China overall, public spending on ECEC has been kept at a lower rate. Between 2000 and 2008, the public expenditure on ECEC in China was below 1.3% of the total financial expenditure on education, and even up to 2010, it was still below 2%. The situation has improved since 2010 due to the national plans for education reform, and in 2012, public investment in ECEC was 3.23% of total public education expenditure, whereas the public spending on education was 4.28% of GDP (Yang 2014).

The cultural appropriateness issue

Another challenge is the cultural appropriateness issue. Jiexiong Zhu, a well-known Chinese ECEC scholar, has criticized the Chinese ECEC curriculum for borrowing too much from the West (Zhu 2015; Zhu and Zhang 2008). Tobin and colleagues (2009) also pointed out that ECEC reform in China had been borrowing heavily from the West and they questioned whether the reform would continue to do so in future.

The definition of ECEC quality in China is also an issue for concern. Wu (2011) reviewed the ECEC quality evaluation studies between the 1970s and 2010s and concluded that quality evaluation in China was largely influenced by Western education

theories, especially from the U.S. This also reflects ECEC modernization trends in China since the 1980s for adopting progressive ideas from Western cultures with a focus on more individualized education, more focus on the rights of the children and on promoting independence and creativity in children.

Zhu (2015) has argued that Chinese ECEC quality standards borrowed from the West are not taking the ‘Chinese cultural context’ into full consideration. Again, his argument was in line with Tobin’s (2005, 2007) view that ‘*quality standards are cultural constructs*’ and ‘*the universality of such core U.S. standards of quality in ECEC*’ is questionable. There are also concerns that ignoring Chinese culture and values in defining Chinese ECEC quality may lead to ‘Cultural Colonialism’ (Li2013; Yan 2009).

It is not easy to explain the culture and value differences between China and the West in a few words. Traditional Chinese culture, communist values, and Western culture all influence ECEC development in a rather complex way. As Hua (2007) has pointed out, ECEC reform in China needs to find a balance between ‘cultural openness’ and ‘cultural nativism’. The Chinese ECEC reform is a verification process in order to help the progress of ideas rather than a process of imitation from the West, and the reform should also avoid scenarios of ‘going back to the old times’ due to the challenges facing reform.

The under-development of 0-3 childcare services

Nowadays in China, 0-3 childcare services can be provided in various settings. Two main types are nurseries and early learning and development centres. Nurseries, which are equivalent to day care centres for children aged under 3 in other countries, focus mainly on providing custodial care for the children of working parents and some nurseries also have boarding facilities. Early learning and development centres, which

are relatively new but also popular in China, can provide services for 0-3 year old children which aims to stimulate their motor skills, language skills and interaction skills. Some centres provide parent-child classes to help parents or other childminders to improve their parenting and caring skills. Unlike the recent boom in kindergarten participation (3-6), childcare (0-3) is still an under-developed area in China.

Policy development

There are relatively few policy regulations for 0-3 childcare services in China.

Traditionally, children under 3 in China were cared for by parents or grandparents at home. Childcare services also used to be welfare services which provided for working parents by working units such as factories, schools and hospitals. Due to the economic reform in the late 1990s with closing down stated-owned factories and working units, nurseries were either closed down or transferred into private centres (Workers Daily, April 15, 2016).

The situation is changing and the Chinese government is making efforts in developing 0-3 childcare services. They were first mentioned in a national development plan document- '*Chinese children development guidelines (2001-2010)*'-, aiming to improved 0-3 childcare services and enhance the family and home education environment (China State Council 2001). In 2003, 0-3 childcare was first highlighted as part of the national early years' education development plan that the government aimed to improve integrated 0-6 child care and education services by enhancing care workers' capacity and parents' caring skills at home (China State Council 2003). This is important since childcare services before were mainly managed by the health department and other welfare relevant departments, and regulations on childcare services such as '*Regulations on the Management of Health and Hygiene in Nurseries and Kindergartens*' focused mainly on health services (MOE 1994).

Following the progressive development of preschool education (3-6) since 2010, ‘*Issues regarding the development of 0-3 childcare services pilot project*’ was initiated, specifying that for regions and cities with 85% (or higher) of enrolment for three --years of preschool education, and with experience and resources in providing public childcare services, should be qualified for the ‘0-3 childcare pilot project’ (MOE 2012). This highlights the central government’s efforts in improving 0-3 childcare services. It also reveals that interest in childcare (0-3) does not match the interest in preschool education (3-6), and the priority nowadays in China is developing preschool programmes for children before primary school.

Access to 0-3 childcare services

Despite the recent policy development, 0-3 childcare services in China are far from adequate. In Shanghai City, public childcare centres have been built in each county and district; local government-led training courses have been provided for childcare workers, with a guarantee that six sessions of free childcare services per year will be available for 95% of families with children under age 3 by 2017 (Shanghai Education Committee 2015). Tianjin City has been experimenting with a community-based childcare network model involving health, education and other local authority departments that can guarantee six free sessions of childcare services per year (Tianjin Education News, December 1, 2010).

Shanghai and Tianjin are two very good examples of the development of public childcare services in China. However, it is not clear whether these public services (six sessions per year) can fully meet up the public demands. And in most of areas in China, no public childcare services are available for children and their families (Li 2013). In the meantime, the private childcare services market in China (both for profit and not for profit) is growing but the accessibility of these services varies considerably, and often

expensive private services are putting off families living on benefits and those without sufficient disposable income for childcare services. In general, the public childcare service in China is limited and the accessibility of private services is largely restricted by families' social economic status and especially by family income; moreover, overall access to childcare services in China is far from meeting public demand.

Qualifications of caregivers and curriculum frameworks

There are no official education and qualification requirements for working in childcare centres in China (Wu, Young and Cai 2012). Kindergarten teachers and those with the kindergarten teachers' qualification can also work in childcare centres. However, as 0-3 childcare services are different from kindergarten education which is more education focused, these kindergarten teachers usually have to attend in-service training on caring for 0- to 3-year olds. The Ministry of Human Resources and Labour Security defines occupational standards for workers caring for children ages 0–3 and provides in-service training and certification. They offer two kinds of 0-3 childcare workers certificates: a caregiver certificate and an early learning and development instructor certificate.

Ideally, childcare workers should hold a relevant childcare qualification, but in reality, there is still a long way to go. It is widely reported that unqualified care workers are working in childcare centres, caring for 0-3 year olds without any professional childcare training (Yangzhou News, January 31, 2016). This is an issue, since the public demand for childcare services is increasing. The lack of regulations for service providers and care worker qualifications may harm the development of 0-3 childcare in China.

Furthermore, there is no general curriculum framework for 0-3 childcare in China and each care provider is free to decide the specific service provided. Some international care centres have adopted the curriculum from the West (for example

Gymboree from the U.S). Some developed areas, such as Shanghai City, however, have been developing their own 0-3 childcare curriculum for public services. The Putuo Early Learning and Development Centre (2012), is a very good example of a culturally appropriate childcare curriculum in China.

Progress and challenges

The Chinese government is planning to improve 0-3 childcare services and the idea is that the government should be responsible for providing public childcare services.

However, the development strategy appears to foreground educating parents in improving their parenting and caring skills rather than encouraging day care services for children under age 3.

Undoubtedly, developing public childcare services in China is currently one of the greatest challenges. The experiences of pilot cities have shown that the involvement of local governments is critical in developing public childcare services, and that this depends on the level of public expenditure, on overall economic development and on local governments' willingness to be involved. Even in the most developed area like Shanghai, public childcare services are not able to meet public demand, let alone the least developed areas in China. Also, considering the current priority for government at each level is developing preschool education to meet the national development goals set in 2010, it is hard to envisage a boom in public childcare services, especially in less developed areas which are struggling to achieve China's goals for preschool education.

Conclusion

ECEC development in China has been experiencing great changes both in policy and practice in the last three decades. China has recently put great efforts into boosting kindergarten participation nationwide. However, public spending has been kept at a low level and the distribution of funding responsibilities between central, provincial and

local government in ECEC development is still not clearly defined. There have been and remain great social economic disparities in ECEC development at various levels. How these disparities will influence children's development is unclear but there is growing concern that it could lead to further development gaps in education and even greater social inequality. The policy and public spending preferences in China nowadays are for expanding centre-based preschool services (3-6). Little is known about the quality of these preschool programmes and there is growing concern that the programme quality cannot be maintained if expansion is too rapid. Finally, it appears that the significant societal interest in kindergarten has not been matched by interest in childcare for 0 to 3 year olds.

A few suggestions are proposed with a view to improving ECEC development in China. In terms of preschool education, legislation frameworks are key and vital factors in providing universal preschool education in China. Not only can they provide a legal basis for implementing policy regulations and guaranteeing financial investments from the government, but they can also be helpful in improving kindergarten teachers' capacity and social status, which are critical in providing high quality preschool education. Intervention-based preschool programmes should be considered for the less developed areas in China. Policy development and financial investments for these areas should be priorities for policy development. Third, the private sector needs to be encouraged to play a more important role in developing a universal preschool education system in China; more policy and financial support should be provided by the Chinese government.

With regard to 0-3 childcare, a separate body for the administration of childcare services should be established at local government level to coordinate services between various Departments relevant to 0-3 childcare. Standard staff training and qualification

requirements for childcare workers should be clearly defined and regulated by the relevant authority in order to guarantee service quality. Community-based childcare network models are suggested for areas with available public resources. In view of the reality that public childcare services are limited and private services are growing, Chinese policy makers should find a way of incorporating private services into the overall development strategies in order to provide better childcare services in China.

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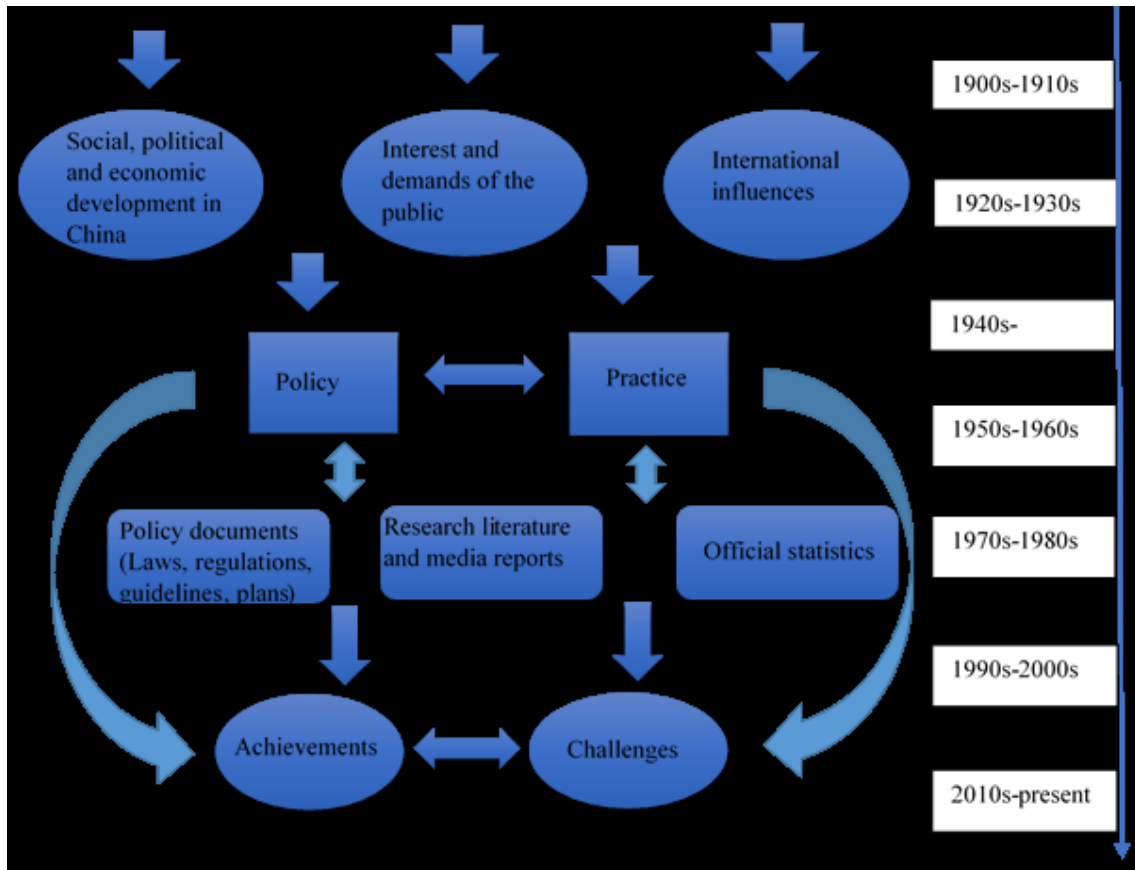


Figure 1 Analytical Framework

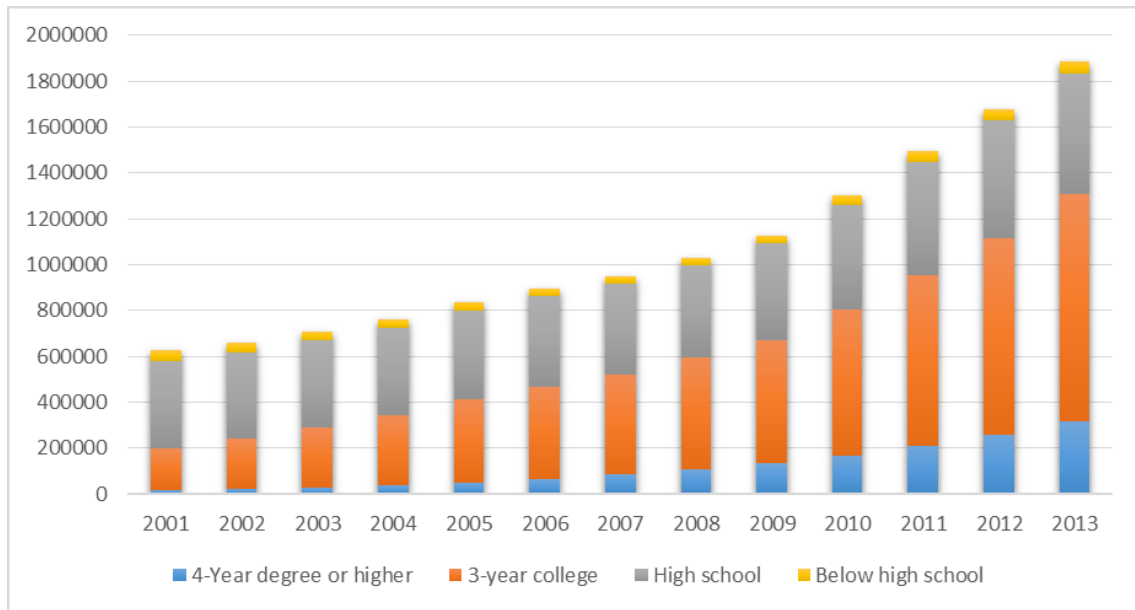


Figure 2. Number of kindergarten heads, full-time teachers by educational attainment between 2001 and 2013 in China. Source: Based on China National Statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2001 and 2013.

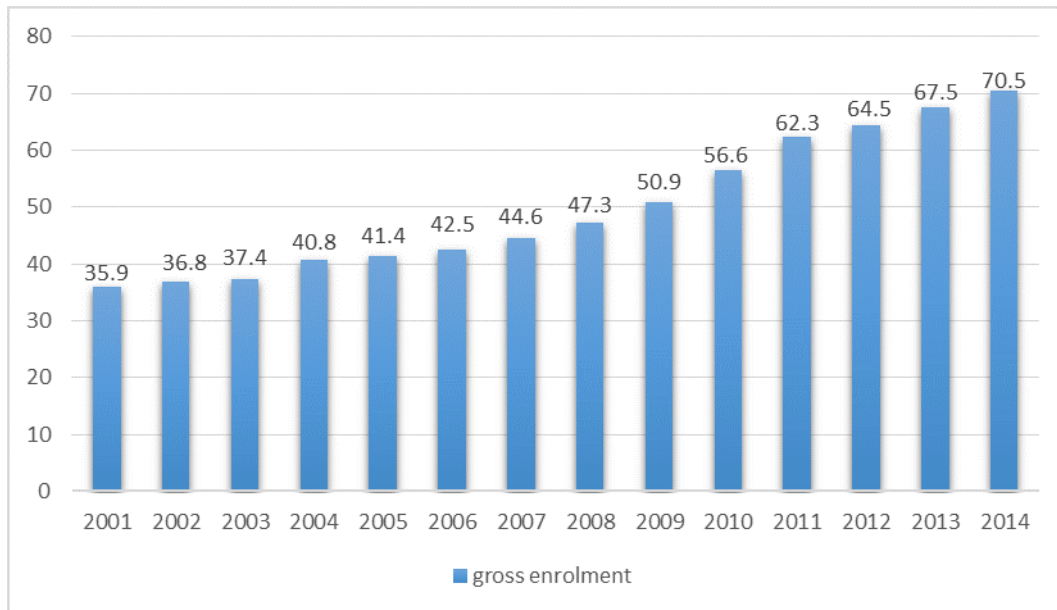


Figure 3. Percentage (%) of participation in preschool or kindergartens for children aged 3 to 6 in China between 2001 and 2014. Source: Ministry of education Early Childhood Education Three-Year Action Plan Online Exhibition.
<http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s7212/list.html>.

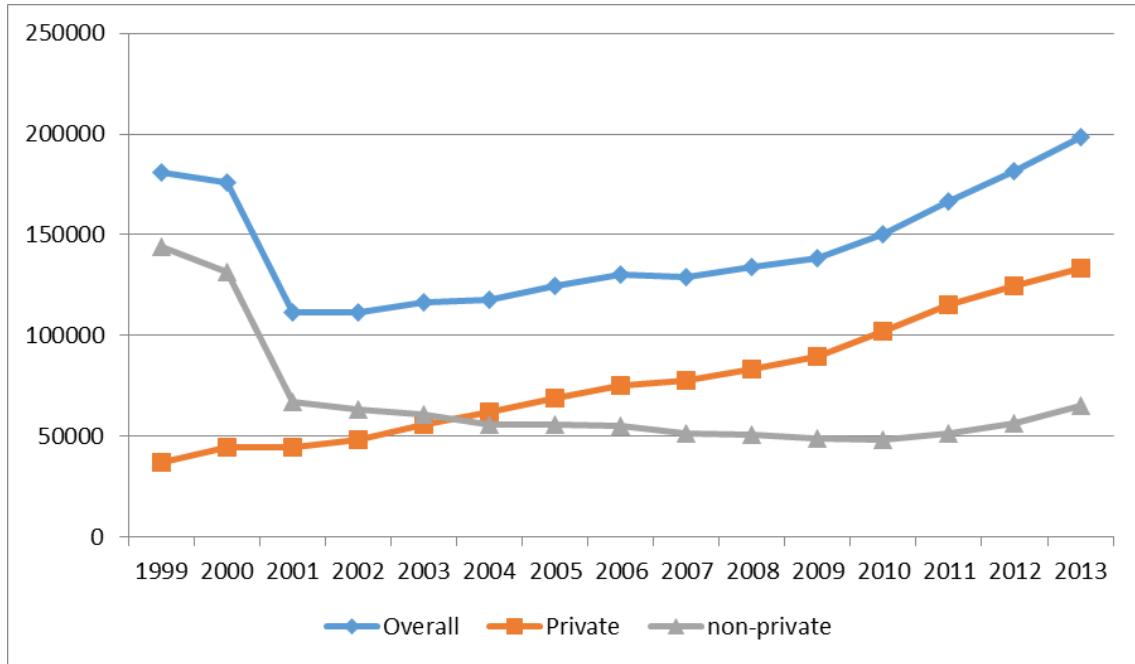


Figure 4. Number of private- and non-private kindergartens in China between 1999 and 2013. Source: Based on China National Statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2001 and 2013.

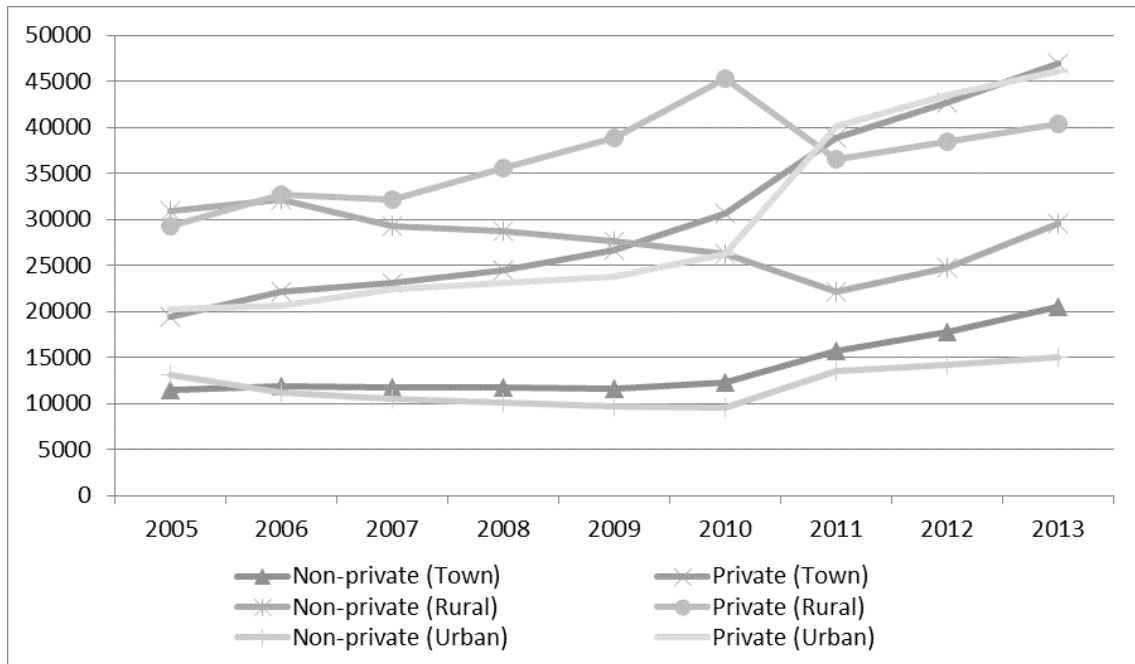


Figure 5 Number of private- and non-private kindergartens in Urban-, Town-, and Rural- areas in China between 2005 and 2013. Source: Based on China National Statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2005 and 2013.

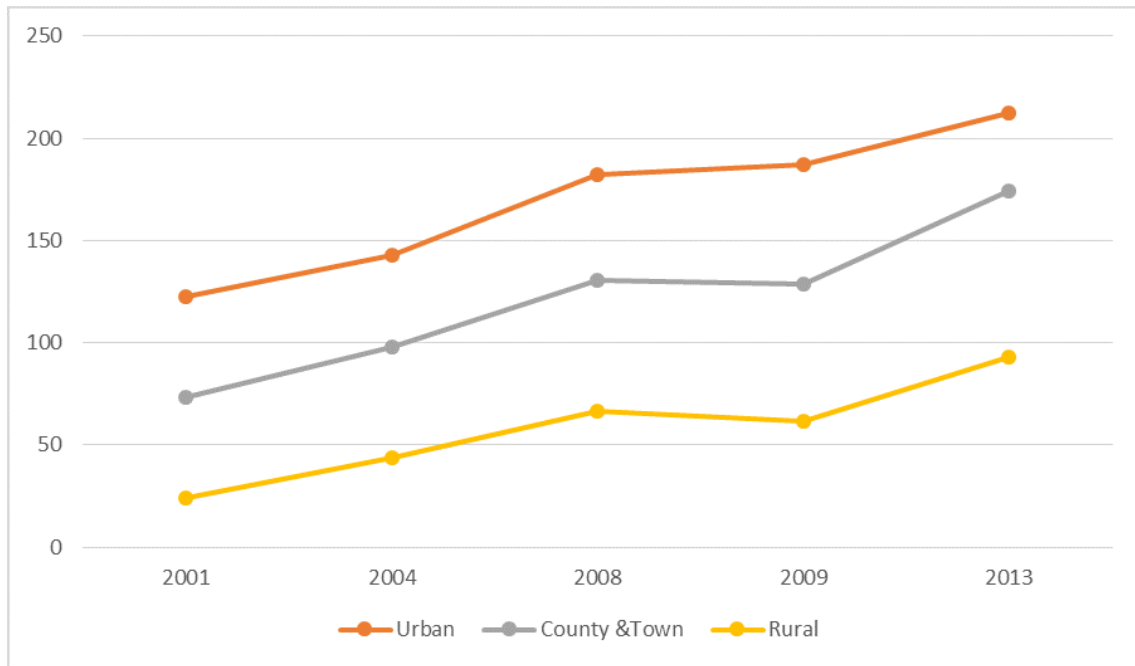


Figure 6 Number of books & magazines in libraries (per kindergarten classroom) in Urban-, Town-, and Rural- areas in China between 2001 and 2013. Source: Based on National Statistics on Education (Early Childhood) between 2001 and 2013.

Table 1. Lists of Major Law, Regulation and Guideline relevant to Early Childhood Education and Care in China

Year	Law, Regulation or Guideline	Highlights and Comments
1932	Kindergarten Curriculum Standards	First formal curriculum
1952	Kindergarten Provisional Guidelines' (Trial draft)	Soviet Union influences
1981	Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial draft)	Guidelines on curriculum
1989	Kindergarten Work Regulations (Trial)	Legal basis for operating kindergarten services
1989	Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens	Principles of operations of Kindergartens
1991	The Law on Protection of Minors	Law
1996	Kindergarten Work Regulations	Replace the 1989 regulations
2001	Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial basis)	Influenced by Western theories and ideas
2003	Opinions from the Development (Units) including the Ministry of Education on Innovations and Development of Early Childhood Education	Cooperative document from various Departments
2010	National Plans for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)	Set concrete goals for ECEC development
2010	Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education	ECE as a measure of Peoples' wellbeing
2011	Issues on Increasing Financial Investment and Support in Early Childhood Education Development	Increasing investment to Middle and Western areas
2012	Issues regarding the Development of 0-3 Childcare Services Pilot Project	The government efforts in improving childcare services
2016	Kindergarten Work Regulations	Replace the 1996 regulations

Source: Ministry of Education (MOE) 1932, 1952, 1981, 1989, 1996, 2001, 2012, 2016; China National People's Congress 1991; China State Council 2003, 2010.

Table 2. Standards for kindergarten group sizes and staff: child ratios in China.

Age group	Group sizes (children)	Full day		Half day	
		Teaching staff	Care worker	Teaching staff	Care worker
(3~4)	20~25	2	1	2	1*
(4~5)	25~30	2	1	2	
(5~6)	30~35	2	1	2	
Mixed age	< 30	2	1	2~3	
		Full day		Half day	
Staff: child ratio		1: 5 ~ 1 : 7		1: 8 ~ 1 : 10	
Teachers: child ratio		1: 7 ~ 1 : 9		1: 11 ~ 1 : 13	

Note: *Kindergartens meet essential requirements should equip with one care worker. Staff (professional teachers, care workers, health workers, teaching assistants, other workers); teachers (professional teachers and care workers). Source: Kindergarten staff ratios standards (Trial basis) (MOE, 2013)