

The Internal Logic, Basic Principles and Practical Directions of Preschool Education Reform in the New Era

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the new era, preschool education in China has entered a critical stage of development, gradually transforming from “universal access and benefit” to “high-quality universal access”. This reform trend aims to advance preschool education policies from “ensuring access to childcare” to “ensuring quality childcare”. It must be guided by changes in population structure and the strategy of building a strong educational country, and take root in China’s local conditions to construct a preschool education theory system that fits social reality. Against this background, this paper studies the internal logic of preschool education reform, and further puts forward its basic principles and practical strategies, so as to provide theoretical basis and practical guidance for building a preschool education public service system that covers urban and rural areas, is rationally distributed and guarantees quality.

Keywords: New era; Preschool education reform; Internal logic; Basic principles; Practical directions

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1. Introduction

Preschool education is the cornerstone of China’s national education system and one of the key focuses in modern educational development. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly put forward “running preschool education well”; the 19th National Congress required “making new progress in ensuring access to childcare”; the 20th National Congress further emphasized “strengthening the inclusive development of preschool education”, providing a theoretical basis for the sustainable development of preschool education. On June 1, 2025, the “Preschool Education Law of the People’s Republic of China” officially came into effect, which not only provides clearer legal protection for preschool education in China but also realizes the upgrading from “policy-led” to “rule of law protection”. In this regard, relevant educators should systematically examine the internal logic, basic principles and practical directions of preschool education reform in the new era, so as to contribute to promoting the high-quality development of preschool education and consolidating the foundation of building a strong educational country.

2. Internal logic of preschool education reform in the new era

2.1. Historical logic: The evolution from “ensuring access to childcare” to “ensuring quality childcare”

Since the reform and opening-up, the policy orientation of preschool education in China has been continuously updated, experiencing three main development stages. The first is the initial stage of restoration and reconstruction, aiming to gradually restore the order of kindergarten operation amid post-war recovery to ensure that all children “have access to kindergartens”^[1]. The second is the exploratory stage of socialization promotion, which aims to promote the common development of diversified kindergarten operators, but gradually exposes problems such as uneven distribution of resources and excessive profit-seeking of some private kindergartens. The third is the new stage of inclusive development, which emphasizes taking inclusive construction as the core orientation of preschool education development.

2.2. Realistic logic: Dual drivers of population changes and national strategy

In the new era, preschool education reform is driven by practical realities. On the one hand, with the increasingly severe problem of population aging, changes in social population structure have exerted an important impact on the allocation of educational resources. Meanwhile, against the background of declining birth rates and urbanization, some regions have exposed structural contradictions in the supply and demand of kindergarten places: tight enrollment in urban concentration areas, while insufficient student sources and low operational efficiency in rural areas. On the other hand, the strategy of building a strong educational country puts forward higher requirements for preschool education, which should not only lay a solid foundation for children’s lifelong development, but also play its due role in narrowing social gaps and promoting educational equity^[2].

2.3. Theoretical logic: Paradigm shift from Western reference to local construction

In the development of China’s preschool education, its theoretical system mainly refers to Western educational achievements, thus facing problems of disconnection with national conditions, cultural traditions and practical needs. Therefore, under the background of reform in the new era, theoretical innovation must rely on local construction. It should not only achieve the goal of universal access and benefit, but also fit local social and cultural characteristics, to solve practical problems such as insufficient connotation improvement, unscientific curriculum and low professional quality of teachers^[3], and establish a theoretical framework with the Chinese discourse system and local cultural elements.

3. Basic principles of preschool education reform in the new era

3.1. Government leadership: Strengthening responsibility and coordination

Government leadership is the basic principle of preschool education reform, emphasizing that governments at all levels should assume the main responsibilities in the planning, investment, talent development, supervision and guidance of preschool education, to implement the inclusive nature of preschool education and form a collaborative model of multi-departmental division of labor and joint management.

Specifically, government leadership should be reflected in three aspects. First, planning and coordination. Taking counties as units, the layout of kindergartens should be unified planned, based on population changes and urbanization trends, the construction of inclusive kindergartens should be implemented, and it should be

integrated into the unified planning system of urban and rural public management and public service facilities^[4]. Second, financial support. The government should provide financial support for the construction of inclusive resources, staffing, improvement of teachers' salaries and better kindergarten conditions, especially giving financial preference to rural and poor areas. Third, supervision and governance. The government should establish a sound governance system, plug regulatory loopholes, clarify governance plans for kindergarten planning, construction, handover and operation, ensure that inclusive resources are not lost, and give play to market and social forces to form a pattern of government coordination and joint development of public and private kindergartens.

3.2. Public welfare and inclusiveness: Adhering to the basic direction and fairness bottom line

Public welfare and inclusiveness are the central principles of preschool education reform, and a clear requirement and core direction of national education reform policies. Specifically, public welfare emphasizes that preschool education is non-profit, implementing the education-oriented nature; inclusiveness, as the basic form of realizing public welfare, focuses on building a kindergarten system with inclusive resources as the main body, ensuring that the vast majority of children can receive affordable and relatively high-quality preschool education.

At the level of resource allocation, the principle of public welfare and inclusiveness emphasizes building a low-cost kindergarten system through inclusive resource support. On the one hand, we should vigorously promote the construction of public kindergartens to ensure basic needs, hold the bottom line, guide the direction and restrain fees^[5]. On the other hand, we should support private kindergartens to provide inclusive services and standardize their operation.

At the level of cost sharing, different regions should verify kindergarten operation costs according to local conditions, establish scientific financial subsidies and fee policies, and ensure a reasonable sharing ratio between the government and families. This can not only ensure the sustainable promotion of public welfare and inclusiveness of kindergartens, but also take into account the affordability of the public.

3.3. Child-centered: Respecting development laws and subject status

The child-centered principle emphasizes that preschool education must proceed from children's physical and mental development characteristics and laws, respect children's personal dignity, listen to and understand children's opinions, and treat every child equally, so as to ensure that educational activities are most conducive to children's development.

This principle can be divided into the following dimensions. First, respect development laws, understand the stages and continuity of children's physical and mental development, avoid the "primary school-oriented" tendency, and abandon mechanical training^[6]. Second, pay attention to individual differences, as different children have different interests, needs and growth rhythms. Teachers should carefully observe and understand children's situations and provide appropriate education and support. Third, guarantee subject status, take children as the core subject of preschool education, take games as the basic form of early childhood education activities, and provide an environment for active exploration and independent learning. Fourth, promote all-round development, and educational content should cover health, language, society, science, art and other fields. We should not only focus on cultivating children's good habits and interests, but also lay a foundation for lifelong development.

4. Practical directions of preschool education reform in the new era

4.1. Resource expansion and structural optimization: Building a balanced layout

In the new era, preschool education should give priority to the task of structural optimization of resources and realize the upgrading from “availability” to “high-quality”. In this regard, a dynamic adjustment mechanism of resource allocation adapting to population changes should be established and improved. Facing the social background of declining birth rates and advancing urbanization, all regions should establish a forward-looking planning mechanism for structural contradictions between excess and shortage of places, scientifically calculate the demand for places at the county level, and adjust and layout the number of kindergartens in advance.

Rural areas are the focus of resource expansion. To vigorously develop rural preschool education, every township should have at least one public central kindergarten; large villages can build independent kindergartens or branches; small villages can adopt joint kindergartens; mobile kindergartens and seasonal classes can be set up in sparsely populated areas according to actual conditions, and professional educational services can be provided through full-time touring teachers, thus forming a three-level preschool education public service network of county, township and village. Urban areas are the key areas of structural contradictions in inclusive resources. The construction standards of supporting kindergartens in residential areas should be standardized, ensuring that supporting kindergartens are planned, designed, constructed, inspected and delivered simultaneously with residential development, and the inclusive nature is implemented^[7]. The core goal of optimizing resource layout and structure is to build a preschool education public service system covering urban and rural areas, rationally distributed, public welfare and inclusive, so as to ensure that every child can receive high-quality preschool education nearby.

4.2. Teacher team construction and professional development: Consolidating the foundation of quality

Teachers are the primary factor affecting the quality of preschool education and the most important resource for kindergarten construction. At present, the construction of preschool education teachers in China still faces many difficulties, especially in some regions where teachers have low academic qualifications, lack necessary teaching qualifications, and need to urgently improve professional quality, hindering the construction of high-quality preschool education.

In terms of teacher team construction, reform should be implemented in the following four aspects. First, equip the teaching and administrative staff strictly according to standards. In the construction and management of public kindergartens in different regions, teaching and administrative staff should be allocated scientifically according to the teacher-student ratio, and the number should be supplemented in a timely manner. It is strictly prohibited to “have vacancies but not fill them”, let alone use substitute teachers for a long time. Private kindergartens should fully equip teaching and administrative staff according to standards and accept regular inspections. Second, legally guarantee teachers’ status and treatment. Public kindergartens should provide a salary guarantee for kindergarten teachers in accordance with policies, ensure timely and full payment of salaries, and adhere to the principle of equal pay for equal work. Private kindergartens should reasonably set teachers’ salaries according to the salary level of public kindergarten teachers. Third, improve the training system. All regions should actively run kindergartens, normal colleges or departments, expand the scale of preschool education professionals at the undergraduate and junior college levels, and then establish a clear professional growth mechanism for kindergarten teachers^[8]. Meanwhile, a full staff rotation training system

for kindergarten teaching and administrative staff should be provided, with regular training for kindergarten directors and teachers by normal universities. Fourth, strengthen the construction of teachers' ethics and professional conduct. The fundamental educational task of fostering virtue and morality should be taken as the basic policy for the implementation of preschool education. Moral education should be integrated into daily care and education activities, and teachers should be guided to be models of virtue, protecting and caring for children.

4.3. Integration of care and education and curriculum innovation: Improving process quality

The integration of care and education is the basic way of preschool education reform in the new era. Kindergartens should adhere to the idea of deep integration of care and education, not only pay attention to children's development of self-care ability and physical health, but also focus on strengthening their cognitive, emotional and social ability growth.

At the level of curriculum innovation, kindergartens should implement a game-based teaching model. Based on the "Guidelines for Early Childhood Learning and Development (3-6 Years Old)," games should be taken as the basic form of children's educational activities. On the one hand, a game-based educational situation should be created to give children interest and space for independent exploration. On the other hand, a project-based learning method should be adopted to integrate game task objectives with project tasks, so as to drive children with interesting issues and exercise their communication, cooperation and problem-solving abilities in continuous exploration and games.

At the level of curriculum content, kindergartens should establish a scientific connection program between preschool and primary education, pay attention to the continuity and progression between curriculum content and primary school courses, form a smoothly transitional curriculum system, and avoid advanced learning tasks. In addition, we should actively develop school-based curriculum resources, combine the actual environment, local culture, children's characteristics, local resources and other factors^[9], to create scientific school-based teaching materials that "take root locally".

In the management of children's daily life, teachers should develop the habit of observing and listening to young children, seize educational opportunities in every link, and provide educational services through interaction with children in daily life, so as to make kindergarten life more fulfilling, pleasant and valuable for growth.

4.4. Digital empowerment and boundary definition: Prudent application of technology

In the digital intelligence era, the integration of preschool education and digital technology has entered a new stage of development. However, technological transformation brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital technology enriches preschool education resources, provides a personalized learning environment and reduces teachers' burden^[10]. On the other hand, children in the preschool stage are in the critical period of physical development, and excessive exposure to and dependence on screens have adverse effects on their physical and mental health.

In this regard, kindergartens should carefully grasp the "direction and limit" of digital technology application in education reform. In terms of direction, the inherent goal of serving education should be clarified, based on expanding learning experience, assisting teachers' development and optimizing home-kindergarten communication, and avoiding replacing real teacher-student interaction. In terms of limits, the

time children spend using screens should be strictly controlled, sufficient outdoor activities should be ensured, and an interactive environment for manual operation and interpersonal communication should be provided.

5. Conclusion

In summary, preschool education reform in the new era is standing at a new historical starting point. From the perspective of reform logic, the development and innovation of preschool education are based on historical evolution, realistic drivers and theoretical support; from the perspective of reform principles, it is necessary to take the government as the leader, implement public welfare and inclusiveness, and adhere to the child-centered service theory; from the perspective of reform practice, it is necessary to coordinate efforts from the dimensions of resource layout, teacher team construction, integration of care and education, and technology application, so as to meet the requirements of the 15th Five-Year Plan for preschool education, create a good environment for the implementation of the “Preschool Education Law,” build a more equitable, high-quality and dynamic preschool education system, so that every child can enjoy a childhood in the sun, and lay a solid foundation for cultivating socialist builders and successors with all-round development of morality, intelligence, physical education, aesthetics and labor.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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