

# The Current Situation, Challenges and Strategies of Transitions from Preschool Education to Elementary Education in China—A Comparison with the Transitional Kindergarten in California

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, with the rapid development of Chinese economy and the increase of investment in education, more attention has been paid to preschool education, especially the educational program of transitions from preschool education to elementary education, which is closely connected with Chinese compulsory education. Although since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the relevant policy texts of China have continuously regulated the subjects, objects, objectives, measures and guarantees of the implementation of the cohesion of young children, there are still some problems that need to be improved. Based on the comparison of the practical experience of transitional kindergarten (TK), a free and high-quality early childhood education convergence project in California, as well as the analysis of literature of transitions from preschool education to elementary education and the investigation of the actual situation in China, this paper found the differences between them and discussed the strategies, namely: 1) the development of child-orientation; 2) the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder cooperation; 3) the autonomy of curriculum design; 4) the quality of teacher selection and training; and 5) the strictness of monitoring and management.*

**Keywords:** *transitions from preschool education to elementary education; transitional kindergarten; preschool education; children*

## 1. Introduction

“Transitions from preschool education to elementary education” has been paid much attention in the field of international basic education, and the discussion on the topic of “transitions from preschool education to elementary education” in China is also gradually heating up in recent years<sup>[1][2]</sup>. With the rapid economic development in China, more and more attention has been paid to early childhood education, especially the transitions from preschool education to elementary education which is closely related to compulsory education has been discussed a lot, at the same time, researchers have also found that there are some problems and challenges<sup>[3]</sup>. On the other hand, the "transitional kindergarten" education program implemented in California started in 2012 is similar to Chinese transitions from preschool education to elementary education, especially it belongs to the transitional stage of education, but there are also some differences.

Transitional kindergarten(TK), has been established in public elementary schools in California since 2012, and it is a new grade in California's K-12 education system<sup>[4]</sup>. The main purpose of TK education is to enable more vulnerable children in California to receive high-quality and free early childhood education, that is, all children of school age, regardless of background, race, zip code, immigration status, income level, special development or not, can study in schools with TK<sup>[5]</sup>. The education program has been implemented ten years so far. The California government said that in addition to the free advantage, TK is also striving for high-quality early childhood education practice, thus laying the foundation for K-12 education reform in the United States and further implementing educational equality<sup>[6]</sup>.

However, before 2026, *Senate Bill No.1381* of California stipulated the age at which young children should enter the TK in batches: in order to respect the law of early childhood development, California's K (kindergarten) education has been open to children who have reached the age of 5 on September 1, 2010, and before that, children who have reached the age of 5 on December 2 can participate in K;

starting from 2012, children who have reached the age of 5 from September 2 to December 2 will enter the newly established grade TK<sup>[7]</sup>. In 2021, *Assembly Bill No.130* stipulated that California will gradually expand the enrollment of TK-age children from 2022 to 2026, so that children who reach the age of 4 on September 1 can enter TK, and eventually become the Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK)<sup>[8]</sup>. Because in the process of implementing TK education, most policy makers, principals, teachers and parents in California have given good feedback to the TK education program. They hope to expand the enrollment scope of TK so that more children can enter TK to receive high-quality early childhood education. At the same time, it will reduce the financial burden for more vulnerable families, and further promote equality and equity in education<sup>[9]</sup>.

The educational practice of TK in California, the current situation of the transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China, and the comparison of the two will be elaborated next.

## **2. Educational Practice of TK in California**

### **2.1 The Teachers of TK**

First of all, in terms of teacher experience, the TK teachers employed have rich experience in education and teaching, with an average of 14 years teaching experience, and has taught elementary school, preschool and kindergarten, of which the proportion of teachers who have taught K is as high as 87%. Second, pre-service recruitment requires at least a bachelor's degree to become an TK teacher, which is in line with the requirements for California public elementary school teachers. They also need to obtain multidisciplinary certificates, learn more professional knowledge and skills in early childhood education, and even master bilingual teaching, as they have to deal with many immigrant young children in California, such as Hispanics and Asians. Furthermore, with regard to the professional development of post-service teachers, most school districts specify the available time and place to gather preschool, TK, K and elementary school teachers together through the "Professional Learning Community", so as to increase the professional knowledge of teachers in different school sections and promote the convergence of preschool, TK and K teachers. Finally, TK teachers are highly demanding, and their salaries are on a par with those of K and elementary school teachers in the public system, with an average annual salary of \$56660<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **2.2 The Course and Teaching of TK**

California does not have clear TK curriculum standards and teaching materials, then government and schools require TK teachers to design the curriculum by themselves based on K and TK children's age characteristics, which requires high professional requirements for TK teachers<sup>[11]</sup>. However, the basic curriculum domain framework of TK is similar to K's curriculum framework, which includes language, literacy, English, math, science, social emotion, art, history, health and other areas of early childhood education. With the curriculum framework and self-designed courses, TK teachers can carry out teaching. In the process of teaching practice, TK teachers usually use education and teaching concepts and strategies suitable for early childhood development, such as development appropriate practice, game teaching, child-oriented teaching, differentiated teaching, group guidance, digital technology and picture book reading, and so on.

### **2.3 Early Childhood Development of TK**

American Institutes for Research and other university researchers have used scientific research methods for many times to follow up and evaluate children after entering TK or even elementary school, so as to find out what kind of development and what aspects of TK children have been developed under the guidance of TK teachers<sup>[6]</sup>. From a large number of research data, it is known that after entering TK, compared with children who do not get TK education, children have achieved a higher level of development in many aspects, such as reading, math, oral English, social, executive and other aspects of skill development<sup>[12]</sup>. These performances are good for children and better prepare for the next stage.

### **2.4 Educational Continuity of TK**

The California government insists on making TK a free and high-quality early childhood education. This kind of education goal is not only enables children to achieve high-quality development, but also

enables children to better transition to K and the first grade of elementary school, which is often referred to as "school readiness". School readiness is also a hot topic around the world, because many education professionals have realized its importance, so they are trying to build a bridge for children and parents. The emergence and implementation of TK in California is a good bridge. It breaks the previous situation of children from poor families receiving low-quality free early childhood education. It can not only make children's school readiness more stable, but also reflect good educational continuity, and initially achieve the natural connection of TK-K- elementary school<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **3. The Current Situation and Challenges of Transitions from Preschool Education to Elementary Education in China**

#### **3.1 Previous Study**

Since the founding of New China, China has mainly experienced the period of one-way executive subject of preschool (1949-1988), to the period of two-way executive subject of preschool and elementary school (1989-2009), and then to the reform of multi-stakeholder executive subject period (from 2010 to now). The relevant policy texts have continuously standardized the subject, object, goal, measures and guarantee of the implementation of the transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China<sup>[2]</sup>. China has been aware of the obvious difference in age characteristics between early childhood education and elementary school education, and understands that early childhood education cannot become elementary education, so currently implementing the plan of "zero starting point" for elementary schools. The national or local governments have formulated corresponding guiding policies or documents for the transitions and connection between preschool and elementary education. However, according to the results of literature analysis and actual investigation, there are still many preschools that do not have an actual bridging curriculum for young children, or even do not understand the scientific concept of transitions from preschool education to elementary education, so as to turn it into an "elementary education". It does not help children to achieve age-appropriate development, but also fails to make a good scientific connection between preschool and elementary school<sup>[13][14]</sup>.

In order to investigate the current practice of young children's transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China, researchers investigated the relevant subjects in five provinces and cities in central, eastern and western China, and learned that the current practice of young children's education of transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China is not good. The specific manifestations are as follows: 1) the school-age children are not ready for school; 2) the parents' concept of connection between preschool and elementary education is not scientific; 3) the competence of teachers' transitions education is insufficient; 4) and the transitions work between preschools and elementary education is not perfect<sup>[3]</sup>. Meanwhile, in other research interviews with children in the preschool senior classes and in the first grade of elementary school, they found that children shared the idea that they need to learn more knowledge made them stressful and had to obey the teacher's instructions, and could not express their opinions<sup>[15]</sup>. So far as to, the current education of transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China pays more attention to the one-way transition and formalized transition, but neglects the reality, and ignores the educational philosophy of giving priority to young children<sup>[16]</sup>.

#### **3.2 Present Study**

The present study is based on the survey of 4 public preschools and 18 private preschools in Yunnan and Shanxi Province in China, and it is not much different from the literature results. Most of preschools are famous in local city, but these cities are not developed cities. In Table 1, these main issues are shown: the development of education of transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China is not only faced with the scientific awareness of parents, teachers, preschools and elementary schools, and less communication and cooperation, but also affected by the difficult governance. These problems are interlinked, and it is not the responsibility of one party, but if the connection of young children is to be scientific and effective, it is necessary for teachers, preschools, elementary schools, parents, communities and other stakeholders to maintain the consistency of practice. The connection or transitions from preschool education to elementary education emphasizes the exchange and cooperation between them, and jointly creates a good environment for young children to adapt to their entrance and later study<sup>[17]</sup>.

Table 1: Feedback of transition from preschool education to elementary education in China.

Results	Preschool	Concrete phenomenon
Elementary education in preschool	private	In most private preschools, except for half an hour of physical activities and normal life activities, most private preschools children spend the rest of their time learning to read characters, memorize Chinese characters, memorize ancient poems, memorize short essays, memorize English words, write and calculate. There are no music, visual art and other art courses, and there are no corner games, such as building blocks corner.
Children obey	public and private	The teacher hardly listens to what the child says, and the child has no right to speak, but can only follow the teacher's instructions and arrangements. When the teacher finds that the child violates the instructions, the child will even be punished, such as being dragged aside to stand alone, eating alone at a table, or publicly criticizing the child.
Teachers comply with	public and private preschools	Teachers can only listen to the preschools principals, especially most inexperienced teachers, who can only carry out the tasks assigned by the preschools principals, and do not have enough ability to judge whether such an arrangement is reasonable or not. In the face of the education and teaching of children in senior classes, it has become a chaotic phenomena, which is "elementary education in preschool" from top to bottom.
One-way transition	public and private	Basically, preschools take the initiative to seek exchanges and cooperation with elementary schools, such as visiting private elementary schools or inviting relevant elementary school teachers to give lectures to preschools, but not many times.
Parental consciousness	public and private	Some preschools themselves do not have a scientific awareness of the connection and transition from preschool to elementary school, still less can they give parents good publicity. Coupled with the contemporary "involution" phenomenon, most parents begin to be anxious from the preschool stage, hoping that their children start to learn a lot of knowledge in preschool, in order not to lose at the starting line. For the sake of surviving and developing, private preschools mostly need to cater to the needs of these parents.
Difficulty in monitoring and management	private	There are both advantages and disadvantages for the rapid development of private preschools in China. Such as parents have more chances to choose different preschools when they think public preschools are not good, and it can increase employment positions. Nevertheless, the relevant government departments have increased difficulties in managing and monitoring preschools.

And yet, under the current education system of China, it is difficult to solve the problems related to transitions from preschool education to elementary education, because 1) in curriculum management, there is a lack of continuous curriculum standards from preschool education to elementary school; 2) in administrative management, the management of early childhood education system is relatively weak; 3) lack of overall management mechanism for preschool education and elementary school education. Consequently, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China has issued the *Curriculum Program and Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* (2022 Edition). This document further emphasizes the importance of the education of transitions from preschool to elementary school, and calls on the relevant personnel to start with curriculum teaching in order to promote the scientific education of transitions from preschool education to elementary education, and keeps up with international trends. At the same time, related personnel also needs to try to construct transitions from preschool education to elementary education of multi-stakeholder cooperation on the basis of practice and evidence, which can be used to support its development and solve related problems<sup>[18]</sup>.

#### 4. Comparison and Strategies Discussion between Transitions from Preschool Education to Elementary Education in China and TK in California

##### 4.1 The Development of Child-orientation

In the education and teaching of TK educators, most of them embody the educational concepts and teaching methods based on child-orientation, such as respecting children, game teaching, differentiated teaching, group guidance, development appropriate practice, complying with the law of children's development, and so on. TK teachers try to make good development of children entering TK, focusing on children in terms of curriculum, classroom and evaluation. They firmly believe that this concept is suitable for early childhood development, and have a certain degree of autonomy to determine their own teaching activities, so as to prepare children for a higher grade year and greater performance.

Last several years, Chinese policies and relevant scholars have been advocating that transitions from preschool education to elementary education should be scientific and conform to the law of early childhood development. But in the actual situation, the scientific consciousness of most preschools is still moving towards this goal. Even a small number of preschools principals still do not have the

scientific consciousness of transitions from preschool education to elementary education, nor can they lead teachers well, which eventually evolves into a mess of "elementary education in preschool", which violates the regular pattern of early childhood development. In the meantime, with the influence of culture, Chinese children have almost no independent choice and right to speak in front of teachers, and most of them need to follow the instructions of teachers. However, the concept of early childhood-based education is in line with ecological theory and development theory, and educators are required to change their ideas as much as possible to give priority to early childhood development<sup>[18]</sup>.

#### ***4.2 The Effectiveness of Multi-stakeholder Cooperation***

The stakeholders of education usually include countries, regions, communities, schools, teachers and parents. The joint cooperation among them can better maintain the consistency of the concept and practice of education and teaching. In 2017, the international authoritative Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released the report of *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Elementary Education*, which adds relatively new concepts in the field of early childhood education to the policy and practical guidance of transitions from preschool education to elementary education, for example, the two-way cooperation of teachers of all ages, and the educational continuity of transitions from preschool education to elementary education<sup>[19]</sup>.

Preschool and elementary school are two different learning period age, and there are large differences. It is precisely because of the differences in education and teaching between TK and elementary schools, in order to better transition and convergence, the synchronous communication and cooperation between them becomes more significant. TK is set up in public elementary schools, and TK teachers communicate and cooperate with K and elementary school teachers more frequently, so they can synchronize to understand the moving direction of different learning period age. The game-based teaching in the early childhood even affects the education and teaching practice of teachers in the early elementary school (grade 1-3). Early elementary school teachers will make some teaching adjustments and add some interesting games to the classroom, so that young children can make a more natural transition to their elementary school life. TK, K and elementary school parents are often invited to participate in professional lectures in the school or community to constantly promote scientific and effective educational knowledge.

At present, most of preschools in China are in the stage of actively seeking cooperation with elementary schools. While some researchers have proposed that it may be easier to promote communication between the two sides if elementary schools take the initiative to invite preschools to implement the cooperation mode. However, the communication between preschool and elementary education in China is almost a faultage, since these two different age groups are in the different school zones, and there are few opportunities for teachers to communicate. The cooperation between preschool and elementary school parents and communities is even more rare. Hence, it has to break through the predicament and increase the communication among all stakeholders in order to achieve the effectiveness of cooperation<sup>[17]</sup>.

#### ***4.3 The Autonomy of Curriculum Design***

TK teachers need to design TK curriculum independently, which is a challenge for them, but it also reflects the high professional skills and comprehensive accomplishment of TK teachers. In this process, TK teachers can also explore more teaching methods suitable for children's development according to the actual situation, and finally better apply them to TK teaching activities. They often combine games to carry out teaching activities, and also use a variety of media or tools to stimulate children's interest and enthusiasm to participate in learning. Nevertheless, judging from the current transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China, many preschool leaders and teachers do not have such ability to design courses independently, and most of preschools can only buy some teaching textbooks and materials developed by out-of-preschool institutions. Thus, although the curriculum has a certain degree of unity, it is difficult to implement the bridging curriculum and teaching for young children, and there is no preschool's own curriculum characteristics. Therefore, it needs to try to develop and design a "preschool-based curriculum" with its own characteristics, while it can improve the ability of teachers, promote the development of young children, and even benefit the long-term competition of the preschool<sup>[16]</sup>.

#### ***4.4 The Quality of Teacher Selection and Training***

The criteria and requirements for the recruitment and training of teachers in TK, they are consistent with the qualification requirements for hiring public elementary school teachers in California. In order to guarantee the quality of TK education and teaching, the level of teachers must be strictly checked from the core role of teachers. After entering the post, TK teachers often receive more training and guidance from university professors and professional learning communities in the education and teaching process. However, the academic qualifications of some preschool teachers in China are still below junior college, and some of them are not majors in early childhood education. In addition, these teachers rarely get more professional guidance and training, especially in private preschools and underdeveloped areas of China, this kind of situation is more common. Therefore, relevant government departments, universities and institutions also need to increase the investment in teachers' pre-service education and post-service training, so as to improve the professional knowledge, skills and comprehensive literacy of preschool teachers<sup>[20]</sup>.

#### ***4.5 The Strictness of Monitoring and Management***

As the history of early childhood education in the United States is longer than that in China, various early childhood education evaluation systems in California have been relatively mature. Moreover, the number of private preschools is not particularly large in California, although it is not centralized management, TK belongs to the public education systems, which is relatively easy in monitoring and management. On the contrary, the number of for-profit private preschools in China has remained high for many years, which cannot be well restricted by national norms and policies, and it is very difficult for education departments to supervise the quality of preschools and early childhood education<sup>[21]</sup>. Effectively, if in the case of weak supervision, private preschools are more likely to "avail oneself of loopholes", which makes it more difficult for transitions from preschool education to elementary education to link up with the scientific and effective education. The policy of inclusive preschool has been implemented in recent years in China, but all kinds of problems and challenges are still very arduous because it is in its infancy. Under the normative guidance of various policies, the number of monitoring managers and strictness need to be enhanced so that national policies can be better implemented.

### **5. Conclusion**

To sum up, TK as a new grade of compulsory education connecting preschool to kindergarten in California, to a certain extent, has the nature of connection and transition with transitions from preschool education to elementary education in China. But their specific implementation also has a big difference. For TK, although it is a new education program in California, it is based on long history and foundation of K, and there are no major problems in various practices. However, in China, there are still many challenges in the transitions from preschool education to elementary education, such as teachers, curriculum, teaching, educational philosophy, multi-party cooperation and departmental supervision. Therefore, if Chinese education department would like to make transitions from preschool education to elementary education be scientific and effective, it needs to be further implemented: 1) the development of child-orientation; 2) the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder cooperation; 3) the autonomy of curriculum design; 4) the quality of teacher selection and training; and 5) the strictness of monitoring and management.

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