

Reflection on the transformation of inclusive kindergarten in the new era

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Abstract: *In recent years, in order to expand the supply of inclusive pre-school education, inclusive kindergartens have gradually emerged in China. However, with the change of the real environment, the transition of inclusive kindergartens in the tide of closure faces many challenges, such as multiple management systems, high costs, connotation system reconstruction and other practical problems. In order to realize the development of "integrated nursery and child care", the national government needs to continuously improve the preschool education system, rationally consider the allocation of resources, and strengthen the training of composite talents. At present, the Chinese government encourages social forces to provide diversified educational services to promote the inclusive development of preschool education. In the future, the extension of inclusive kindergartens to the younger age has become an inevitable trend, which requires the introduction of supporting measures to guide the extension of their services to the younger age, and the construction of integrated nursery and child care institutions, so as to meet the needs of parents and expand the survival and development space of inclusive kindergartens.*

Keywords: *Inclusive kindergarten; "Integration of childcare"; Survival dilemma; Transformation reflection*

1. Introduction

After the reform and opening up, China's preschool education market is mainly occupied by three types of kindergartens: public, collective and private. In the new era, the Communist Party of China's "twenty Major Report" stressed that the national government should continue to make efforts in the goal of "children have education" and strengthen the inclusive development of preschool education. However, China's public kindergartens are very limited in terms of number, coverage area and service population.^[1] In 2010, with the implementation of the inclusive preschool policy, an inclusive kindergarten model emerged, which broke the preschool education "three types" development pattern for a long time.

2. The background overview

The scale of kindergartens across China has gone from continuous expansion to gradual contraction in just five years. May 2017 marked an important turning point for the preschool industry. In order to solve the problem of "difficult and expensive admission to kindergartens", the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and other four departments jointly issued the "Third Preschool Education Action Plan (2017-2020)" for the first time: by 2020, the coverage rate of inclusive kindergartens should reach about 80%. In November 2018, The State Council of the People's Republic of China issued "Several Opinions on the Deepening Reform and Standardized Development of Preschool Education," which once again strengthened the 80% target of the third phase of preschool education plan, and further required that "in provinces where the proportion of children in public kindergartens is low, gradually increase the proportion of children in public kindergartens, and reach 50% in principle by 2020." Since then, the national kindergarten office structure has been officially adjusted. With the establishment of the "5080" goal, all localities began to vigorously build new public kindergartens. In 2019 and 2020, the national government has issued two supporting policies, one is to specify that the community supporting kindergartens must be run by the public or commissioned into an inclusive private park; The second is the release of the county-level Supervision and Evaluation Measures for Universal and inclusive Preschool education, which includes the three indicators of the gross enrollment rate of preschool three years of 85%, the coverage rate of inclusive kindergartens of 80% and the proportion of public kindergartens of 50% in the assessment and accountability system of local governments.

According to the "Statistical Communique on the Development of National Education" in 2022, the number of inclusive kindergartens in 2022 is 41,440,500, a decrease of 741,600 compared with 2011.^[2] Based on the declining birth rate, it is predicted that the size of kindergartens and the number of kindergartens will continue to decrease. In the tide of closure, public kindergartens have little impact because of their significant advantages. Although for-profit private kindergartens charge the highest fees, they can meet parents' differentiated expectations for kindergartens due to their personalized, characteristic and quality development positioning. The appearance of inclusive private parks is that the country is facing the universal "difficult to enter the garden, expensive to enter the garden" background, through the introduction of social forces to fill the shortage of inclusive degrees in public parks. However, with the birth rate falling, inclusive kindergartens are facing the most difficult operational difficulties.

3. Analysis of survival dilemma

According to the "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of National Education", in 2022, the gross enrollment rate of preschool education in China will be 89.7% in 2022, an increase of 1.6% over the previous year. There were 46.2755 million children enrolled in preschool education nationwide, about 1.77 million less than the previous year, and this is the second consecutive year that the number of children in kindergartens has declined. There were 289,200 kindergartens nationwide, 5,610 fewer than the previous year, marking the first negative growth since 2008.^[2] In the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, the demand for preschool education has entered a negative growth stage, and the demand for childcare degrees will continue to decline, especially from 2023 to 2025, with a rate of more than 4 million childcare degrees per year.

Due to the combination of factors such as the reduction of kindergarten scale, the decrease of income and the increase of investment ratio, inclusive kindergartens are facing a severe survival crisis. Under the background of decreasing student size, inclusive kindergartens often save themselves through commercial preferential mode, which makes education more market-oriented. In addition, because of the pursuit of development, inclusive kindergartens pursue "non-differentiation" and blindly copy the kindergarten and curriculum model of "high quality and high price" public kindergartens, resulting in the loss of their own characteristics. Or in order to meet parents' market-oriented value orientation of "knowledge and skills", and also to meet parents' needs for children's "all-round development" in form, inclusive kindergartens often imitate and introduce various "characteristic courses".

From the situation of the past two years in China, it is a common practice for kindergartens to run self-rescue classes after the decrease of students. The "14th Five-Year Plan" clearly states that the development of childcare services should be given priority, and the number of childcare degrees per 1,000 people should be increased from the current 1.8 to 4.5. Kindergartens play an important role in broadening the supply channels of universal childcare. In 2023, 17 national ministries and commissions jointly issued a document that clearly stated that "on the basis of meeting the requirements of universal preschool education, kindergartens with conditions are encouraged to enroll children aged 2-3 years old." However, for inclusive kindergartens, the transformation of "childcare integration" has also brought a variety of practical difficulties, such as the operational difficulties brought by the multi-head management system, the capital observation generated by the high cost of investment, the explicit pressure caused by the connotation system reconstruction, and the integration difficulties brought by the traditional parenting model.

The management system of childcare services and preschool education in China adopts the mode of "local responsibility, hierarchical management and division of responsibilities among relevant departments", and relevant departments of education, health, market supervision, civil affairs, construction, public security, women's federations and other relevant departments are responsible for the development of childcare services and preschool education. It is important to point out that infants and young children under the age of 3 and 3 to 6 years old have different age characteristics and physical and mental development laws, and their activities are also different. Therefore, this requires continuous investment in the integration of existing infrastructure transformation, upgrading and transformation. In order to realize the development of "two kindergartens in one", it does not mean that the nursery and kindergarten are simply put together, or that the existing kindergarten resources are simply used to set up a nursery, but the care of infants under the age of 3 and the preschool education of children between the ages of 3 and 6 are organically permeated and integrated. To provide scientific, reasonable and moderate growth conditions for children aged 0 to 6 years. With the support of the family planning policy and the retirement policy, parents are reluctant to send their children to care institutions, and grandparents have time and energy to take care of their children, and family care based on intergenerational parenting has

become the mainstream mode of raising infants and young children aged 0-3 since the 1990s. Coexisting with this mainstream parenting mode, the complementary market parenting mode mainly includes early education and small-scale nursery care.

4. The construction path of "one child care" transformation

In 2022, the "Outline of the Strategic Plan for Expanding Domestic Demand (2022-2035)" of The State Council of the People's Republic of China pointed out that social forces should be encouraged to provide diversified educational services and support and regulate the development of private education. The "Preschool Education Law (Draft)" submitted to the two sessions in June 2023 also indicates that social forces should be regulated to participate in running kindergartens and promote the inclusive development of preschool education. The existence of inclusive kindergartens has its special historical background. Affected by the overall needs of the society, the extension of inclusive kindergartens to the younger age is inevitable. The "14th Five-Year Plan" and the outline of the 2035 vision goals clearly put forward: "We should support enterprises, public institutions, social organizations and other social forces to provide inclusive childcare services, and encourage kindergartens to develop integrated childcare services." In addition to Shanghai, Anhui Province issued a peace of mind action plan for child care, proposing that in principle, care classes held by public parks should provide inclusive services, and new and expanded public parks should set up inclusive care classes. The exploration and practice of various places shows that local governments can not only solve parents' worries but also effectively expand the survival and development space of kindergartens by introducing a series of supporting measures to guide the extension of inclusive kindergarten services to the younger age groups, but also build integrated child-care institutions.

4.1. To improve the system of preschool education

In China, current laws and regulations still remain in the original definition of kindergartens providing educational services for children aged 3 to 6 years old, placing 0-3 years old infant care in a subordinate or marginal position. Although various local programs have been introduced to promote the development of inclusive care based on their own different actual conditions, it is still unclear whether kindergartens should have more specific provisions in terms of venue, food, employment, security, and service as independent care institutions when implementing the "garden within a garden" inclusive care service. From the perspective of the relevant system of childcare, only when the supervision subject is clear and the supervision system is standardized, can the practice of childcare be better supported and developed.^[3] As far as national policies are concerned, kindergartens are encouraged and supported to carry out "integrated care and preschool" childcare and education services, but such encouragement belongs to advocacy rather than guarantee. Follow-up supervision and guidance are also the key to the development of kindergartens. For the transformation of inclusive kindergartens, only under the national policy and system guarantee of inclusive preschool education and preschool integration for 0-6 years old, can there be a legal basis and steady development. On January 1, 2023, the "Regulations of Shanghai Municipality on Preschool Education and Childcare Services" became the first local regulation in China to integrate preschool education and childcare services. It is suggested that all localities should also introduce relevant regulations as soon as possible, with one department taking the lead in charge of preschool education and childcare services, and other relevant departments should establish a comprehensive coordination mechanism to coordinate and solve major problems in the development of preschool education and childcare services, so as to avoid unnecessary duplication of construction and waste of resources caused by coordination problems.

4.2. To consider the allocation of resources reasonably

At present, the superposition of high-quality education resources in cities has produced a certain "siphon" effect, and the phenomenon of "crowded cities, weak towns and empty villages" has appeared in some places. With the continuous advancement of new human-centered urbanization, how the government responds to the demand for high-quality education and scientifically plans educational resources according to the changing trend of preschool population has become an issue of The Times. Based on this, it is suggested to strengthen accurate calculation and scientific planning, to continuously optimize the allocation of educational resources, to strengthen the flexibility of degree supply, to regulate the scale of teacher training, in order to better cope with the fluctuating development of population. Government departments should fully take into account the differences in population density, population

structure and mobility in different regions, do a good job of calculating the demand for kindergarten enrollment year by year, and continue to improve the distribution of urban and rural preschool education and public service network. In this process, the government should accurately count the data on the demand for childcare, strengthen the management of the additional childcare resources in the current inclusive kindergartens, pay attention to avoid blindly building, canceling or merging inclusive kindergartens, and deal with the relationship between the construction of inclusive kindergartens and students' receiving preschool education nearby, so as to facilitate the provision of accurate services by inclusive kindergartens. Improve the efficiency of the use of existing resources. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the downward extension of inclusive kindergartens to establish childcare functions is not simply the "superposition" of the two types of service objects, and the key lies in the cohesion and fit of guiding ideology, management system and policy objectives. From a practical point of view, the coordinated development of preschool education and childcare services should include the connection between the management system of preschool and childcare which is the administrative management and the kindergarten management system, so as to truly achieve the goal of coordinated development. Under the trend of the coordinated development of childcare services and early education, it is suggested that the education department should be the competent authority after the coordinated development. Through such institutional arrangements, this is not only a subdivision in the field of education, but also helps to return the current childcare services provided by inclusive kindergartens from welfare subsidies to the essence of education.

4.3. To strengthen the training of composite talents

According to the prediction of relevant professionals, the shortage of childcare talents is expected to be as high as 2 million in 2025, but the quality of employees in the childcare industry is uneven. Due to the large differences in the ability characteristics, behavior characteristics and needs of children aged 1-3 and 3-6, it is necessary to have personnel with different professional backgrounds. If kindergarten teachers are directly allowed to fill the position, it will certainly bring about the problem of professional mismatch. In view of the current situation that a large number of inclusive kindergarten teachers lack relevant professional background, the most important thing is to formulate scientific recruitment standards. This should include professional standards such as moral quality, vocational skills and other indicators, which can provide reference for the training and screening of professional teachers for post transfer. It is also necessary to encourage existing inclusive kindergarten teachers to participate in relevant professional ethics and professional skills training and obtain qualification certificates. Secondly, it is suggested that in the process of orientation transformation of inclusive kindergartens, the training of composite teachers and the development of integrated teaching materials should be the main starting point, and the coordinated development of childcare services and preschool education should be promoted. It is also necessary to hire front-line infant caregivers or experienced infant care service managers as training teachers, and further carry out relevant job training for current teachers. This will mainly be the original lack of infant safety care, daily care, disease prevention and care, nutrition and feeding, medical education, infant psychology, education, family education guidance and other knowledge and ability into the training curriculum. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the development of integrated and innovative courses, and constantly train interdisciplinary talents to meet the needs of the industry. Finally, it is necessary to establish a long-term mechanism for the training of childcare service talents, formulate training methods for teachers on the job, and standardize the continuous training after the transfer.

4.4. To refine the classification system support

It is suggested that local governments should introduce a series of detailed policies on providing extended care services for inclusive kindergartens as soon as possible, so as to strengthen the policy guidance for the transformation work of inclusive kindergartens; It is necessary to further clarify the participation conditions, charging standards and implementation procedures of inclusive care, so as to accelerate the construction of the inclusive care system and guide and support the transformation of more inclusive kindergartens. It is necessary to establish and improve the supervision, investigation and management mechanism for inclusive kindergarten care services. It is necessary to fully implement the registration and filing management system of inclusive kindergarten institutions, grasp the information on the development of inclusive kindergarten care services in a timely manner, complete the update of the supervisory ledger every six months, and implement a unified credit evaluation for the inclusive kindergartens that have carried out childcare services. A filing time limit should be proposed for inclusive kindergartens that have standards and specifications for childcare service institutions but have not yet

been filed. In addition, it is recommended that the government establish a childcare information platform, especially to provide information about inclusive kindergarten childcare services, including childcare concepts, teacher-child ratio, enrollment age, whether there are priority conditions, charging standards and service types. At the same time, it is necessary to vigorously carry out scientific childcare publicity and education on the information platform, guide more families to pay attention to and understand infant and child care services, and further enhance the social awareness and recognition of childcare services.

5. Conclusions

The transformation of inclusive kindergartens is not only in line with the trend of the market environment, but also an inevitable choice of The Times. It is necessary to learn from the concept of "difference compensation" education policy in developed countries, and constantly improve and optimize policies and systems, so as to make up for the shortcomings of inclusive pre-school education in China, reproduce the competitiveness and creativity of inclusive kindergartens, and continue to survive under the wave of population fluctuations.

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