

An Analysis of Early Childhood Education Policy in China

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Abstract

China has given high priority to develop its entire educational system including early childhood education. Through secondary data and empirical studies, this paper critically analyzes the policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation of China's national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development (2010-2020) with regard to early childhood education. The study indicated that formulation of the plan was done with high collaboration of the government and the people. Both ordinary people and experts in the field participated through various platforms. So far, the plan is meeting its objectives, although there are discrepancies between different provinces, and within municipalities. The study will enable to shape the education policy in practice, and share the experiences of China to other countries with similar initiatives.

Keywords: early childhood education, China, national plan, education policy

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Educating qualified citizens is the indispensable task of every nation-state. This is in order to respond to the increased ethnic and cultural diversity, and new economic and cultural orientation (Banks, 2004; Marginson, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, 2001) which have been brought by socio-economic and political development since World War Second. Among other major developments, nation-states have experienced the transformation of industries from simple, manual, and local to more technological, professional, and global levels. Hence, this raised questions and possibilities about how to educate citizens with thoughtful and clarified identifications with their cultural communities, nation-states, and the global community (Banks, 2004).

In this view, China's education system has become high priority for the government (KPMG, 2010). The entire Chinese Communist Party, and society have worked hard to develop socialist education with Chinese characteristics. In addition, it has guaranteed the right to education for billions of Chinese populace, establishing the world's largest education system. This is evidenced by consecutive reforms that are taking place in the country to adjust and cope with the fast changing modern world, and face any forthcoming challenges. These reforms have ranged from early childhood up to tertiary education.

China's national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development (2010-2020) (*hereinafter referred to as the Plan*) was developed to enhance citizens' overall quality of education, boost educational development in a scientific way, and speed up socialist modernization (Yue, Zongtang, Jing, & Chao, 2010). This was announced in accordance with the strategic arrangement of the 17th Communist Party of China National Congress that was held in Beijing on 15 to 21 October 2007. The main objective of the Plan was to give priority to education and turn China into a country rich in human resources.

The Plan comprised all levels of education starting from early childhood education to tertiary education (China State Council, 2010). Based on secondary data and empirical studies, this paper gives an analysis of the Plan with the main focus on the early childhood education segment. In analyzing the Plan, issues of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation are discussed.

The study helps to shape the policy in practice regarding the Plan. Besides, it could enable t to share the experiences of China to other countries with similar initiatives. The study can also serve as a base for future studies.

General Background of Early Childhood Education in China

Early childhood education in China refers to education that is provided to children from birth up to the age of 6. It is provided in early childhood education and care institutions classified according to the age of the children as follows: Nurseries (0–3), kindergartens (3–6), and preschool classes (5–6) (Corter, Janmohammed, Zhang, & Bertrand, 2006; Zhu, 2009). However, in some areas, kindergartens begin to enroll and provide education to children of 2–3 years old, and offer guidance service for 0–2 years old children, and their families. The Ministry of Education is in charge of kindergartens while the Ministry of Hygiene runs the nurseries. Funding comes from a variety of sources, including student fees (Corter, et al., 2006).

Early childhood education in China has long history. However, the first Chinese Kindergarten was officially opened in 1903(Hui, 2013). Since then, and following the foundation of the Republic of China in 1949, early childhood education has undergone dramatic changes which are characterized by traditional methods of teaching and learning. In the 1980s, China's early childhood education system started to transform on the basis of upholding culture and traditions, and moving towards modern system of teaching and learning. However, despite the rapid development of the economy over recent years, the provision of early childhood education in the country remains a major challenge (Zhou, 2011). This concerns how to addressing quality, and equal access of early childhood education which have not been totally solved until this time. The quality and quantity of early childhood education still remains different between urban and rural areas as well as within different provinces and municipalities. The ratio for early childhood education provision in China is low, especially in the western part of China, and in rural areas (Zhou, 2011). Chinese schools had been facing with lack of trained teachers (Smith, 1982), and traditional style of teaching was prevalent when compared to schools in Western countries (KPMG, 2013).

In this view, early childhood education in China is guided by the *Regulation on the Operation of Kindergartens* and became part of Kindergarten Education since 1996 (Wang, 2008). The local governments, which are the main providers of early childhood education, establish and promulgate supporting policies, and local regulations and systems. While regional educational authorities adopt quality standards and evaluation systems for

kindergarten education (UNESCO, 2011). Chinese kindergartens provide full-day programs serving children from three to five years old. Children are generally categorized into three preschool groups by age. These are juniors (3-yearsold), middle (4-yearsold) and seniors (5-years old). The programs serve for two fold purposes of childcare, and educational preparation. This legislation has influenced the development and features of early childhood education, giving momentum for China's national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development (2010-2020) which stipulates the current direction of early childhood education in China.

Early Childhood Education as Stipulated in the Plan

As indicated in the Plan, the belief behind the early childhood education segment is the fact that early childhood education is significant to physical and mental growth of children, to their habit fostering, and intellectual development. Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on the issues governing children's mental and physical development through persistent scientific nursing and teaching methods, in order to ensure children's happy and healthy growth. Hence, in line with this understanding and the general principles, and strategic goals of the reform such as delivering equal access and education to everyone, the early childhood education plan focuses on three major objectives. They are universalizing preschool education, defining government responsibilities, and strengthening preschool education in rural areas.

Universalizing Early Childhood Education

The term universalization is a popular term in education policy. According to UNESCO (2000), universalization means making accessible to everyone. Different nation-states have approached this requirement differently. Some countries have introduced free education, exemption from uniform requirement, and/or increased the number of schools, teachers, and even embarked on different educational campaigns. This is mainly to break all barriers to education, and make education accessible to everyone.

In the past, China had such strategies at primary and lower secondary schools, but little effort was done on early childhood education. In this view, the early childhood education policy of the Plan seeks to increase efforts in order to actively push forward early childhood education by 2020. According to the Plan, one-year preschool education should become the norm; two-year preschool education should be universalized; and three-year preschool education will be popularized in regions where conditions are ripe.

Defining Government Responsibilities

One notable barrier to universalize early childhood education in many countries is government's focus to other levels of education, and limited effort towards leading early childhood education. In order to end this, the Plan defines the government's roles by strengthening the establishment of a government-led kindergarten management mechanism. This includes social participation and strengthening of both public and private kindergartens by increasing government inputs, training teachers, and improving management of preschool education. The government also regulates the tuition fees and support families that cannot afford preschool education.

Strengthening Preschool Education in Rural Areas

Rural children are often vulnerable in accessing equal education opportunities to their urban counterparts. This is also the case with rural early childhood education in China (Zhou, 2011). It is therefore necessary to universalize preschool education in such areas, and make sure that all the children left behind by parents working away from their home villages are sent to kindergartens. In line with this, the Plan stipulates that new kindergartens shall be built while old ones are renovated and expanded to strengthen the rural preschool education. The Plan proposed that surplus middle and primary school buildings and teachers can also be used for kindergarten (preschool classes) by making necessary adjustments.

Table 1. *Major goals for preschool education development from 2009 to 2020*

Indicators 2009	Units	2009	2015	2020
Number of children in kindergartens	Million	26.58	34.0	40.0
Gross attendance rate for those entering kindergartens 1 year before starting school	%	74.0	85.0	95.0
Gross attendance rate for those entering kindergartens 2 years before starting school	%	65.0	70.0	80.0
Gross attendance rate for those entering kindergartens 3 years before starting school	%	50.9	60.0	70.0

(China State Council, 2010, p.11)

Based on the above objectives, the Plan stated four major goals of preschool education with clear indicators as shown above in Table 1. Accordingly, as it is indicated in Table 1, by the year 2020 the gross attendance rate for children entering kindergartens one year before starting school will reach 95%. Whereas the attendance rate for these who enter kindergartens two years and three years before starting school will reach 80% and 70% respectively. Moreover, the number of children in kindergartens is expected to rise from 26.58 million in 2009 to 34 million in 2015, and 40 million in 2020.

Methodology

The study used qualitative research design to enable critical analysis (Bryman, 2008; McNabb, 2008). The research is descriptive in nature to analyze the formulation, implementation and trend of the Plan. Secondary data are collected from different sources to enable the researchers to study the past conditions and understand the changes occurring through time (Singleton & Straits, 2010). Related and relevant documents such as statistical data, assessment reports, and press release related to pre-primary education in China were reviewed from different sources including Chinese and international organizations websites. The study mainly reviewed information related to the policy formulation, strategies used to implement the Plan, and data that show the progress of the Plan. Hence, secondary data from UNESCO, China Market Research Reports, and other sites were used. The study

employed thematic analysis in which a structural skeleton is established to provide meaningful analysis (McNabb, 2008) with reference to the Plan as well as other theoretical perspectives, and empirical studies.

Policy Analysis and Discussion

Formulation of the Plan

Policy formulation and adoption is characterized by three major events: the policy is expressed in a written language, fund is secured, and a policy formulated in words is adopted (Fowler, 2009). Although the formulation work of the Plan was carried out entirely under the direct leadership of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, and the State Council, different mechanisms were used to seek for public opinion and feedback. A research was done in order to assess the level of education in China and solicit ideas that the general public would want to see addressed in the policy. The draft was made public for comments in early 2009 and 2010 (Guiren, 2010; Yue et al., 2010).

In early 2009, the draft was made public for comments for the first time. It went through two phases. In the first phase the public was encouraged to make comments on major issues about education. People of all walks of life expressed their views through various channels. Thousands of letters were received and over two million proposals were put forward (Guiren, 2010). In the second phase 20 major issues were shortlisted and were made public for comments. These issues were of high public concern and proper handling of them could make significant impact on the overall reform and development of education. They fell into four categories. They are strengthening education in rural areas, deepening teaching and management reform, resolving prominent issues in education of all types at all levels, and guaranteeing education funding (Yue et al., 2010). Letters, phone calls, and proposals not only carried the new hopes of the whole nation for educational reform and development, but also they provided new ideas for further improvement of the Plan.

By January 2010, after more than a year of effort, the formulation work had made noticeable headway and the second round in the solicitation of public opinion began. The

public responded quickly. Comments and suggestions came from people of all age groups. Within one month, 27, 855 comments were received, involving issues such as preschool education, balanced development of compulsory education, college entrance examination reform, college management reform, funding increase for education, teacher training, and so on (Yue et al, 2010). Many comments and suggestions were thought-provoking, insightful, targeted and helpful for the revision and improvement of the draft Plan.

From January 11th to February 6th 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao chaired 5 meetings to discuss topics like higher education, vocational education, basic education, education management, and public opinion on the issue (Jingyue, Bin, Jing, & Xiaoxi, 2010; Yue et al., , 2010). At the meetings, he talked with representatives from various sectors and listened to their opinions and suggestions. At the fifth meeting, the premier invited parents, middle school students, farmers, workers, migrant workers, and free-lancers to discuss education-related problems. Every suggestion and letter carried the aspiration and wisdom of the people. After careful deliberation on the comments, the draft Plan was revised. Major changes were made to help the Plan to comply with relevant laws, and to reflect the national need for scientific development. Moreover, a National Conference on Education Work, the first of its kind in the 21st century was conducted in Beijing shortly before the release of the Plan to promote sound education development in the new era (Chinese Scholarship Council, 2013). The conference was attended by President Hu Jintao, and Premier Wen Jiabao who stressed for sound educational development with strong involvement of local governments (Xinhua, 2010a).

The policy formulation process used in the Plan indicates that the policy was set through mobilization model in the sense that policy makers were the initiators of the agenda while they were also interested to arouse the interest of the public, and try to win their support for the agenda (Wang, 2008). A blue print for the Plan was prepared, and communicated to the people for opinion and feedback, and finally adopted with clear principles and goals. This indicates that a consensus for the Plan was reached after an open and thorough discussion, and clear understating of its objectives by the public. This is mainly done in a belief that successful implementation of policies requires a strong sense of participation from the public. Besides, it could be argued that the Plan was politically initiated, and has an economic backing of the government. This is advantageous when considering issues of

funding, and resource allocation for the implementation of the policy in the future. Generally, the policy formulation process is in coherence with the idea of Fowler (2009) that the policy is expressed as a form of a document, funding is equally important, and the policy formulated in words is already adopted.

The Plan: Strengths and Gaps

Setting a long-term plan to develop early childhood education is a great achievement by itself. It shows the government's dedication to develop the sector, where many other nation-states and multilateral organizations prefer to invest in other levels of education such as higher education which provides higher return. Generally the Plan has set clear and measurable objectives to develop early childhood education in China. The inclusion of the 2015 objectives enables the Plan to measure the activities carried out, achievements gained, and shape its directions accordingly. Moreover, the stipulation of the Plan for strong government involvement in the era of globalization is vital for educational equity, and widening participation. According to the 2014 China Pre-school Education Industry Research Report, by the end of 2013, 67.2% of the total numbers of kindergartens in China were private (China Market Research Reports, 2015). This shows that the number of public institutions aimed at early childhood education had been reduced dramatically over the past 20 years (Zhou, 2011). It seems that the nation realized the gap that could be created due to such neoliberal policies, and started to take initiatives. For instance, government input in early childhood education, regulation of tuition fees, and support for families that cannot afford preschool education could minimize the gap that could be created between the rich and the poor families. These kinds of actions are significant in our modern world where few individuals control the majority of the world's economy, and neoliberal policies focus on maximizing profit at any cost (Gadotti, 2008).

The indication of the Plan to use surplus middle and primary school buildings, and teachers for kindergarten gives two advantages. It decreases expenditure of government by increasing efficient use of resources, and alleviates the shortage of human and materials resources in kindergartens. In fact, this can be a good model to balance the class size, and amount of resources in different levels and programs of education. However, when we look

at developing and universalizing early childhood education, this should go beyond reducing the urban-rural gap. It should extend into special education needs, gender, race/ethnicity, and other sections of the society. Children with disabilities, teacher attraction measures in the disadvantaged areas, and parental awareness to send their children to preschools were not properly dealt in the Plan. Moreover, teacher-child ratio was left open to be decided by provinces while children retention rate in preschools was not emphasized clearly with measurable goals.

Implementation Strategies

The policy implementation process of the Plan is supported by different mechanisms including three-year plan, cooperation between different institutions, government funding, and other support systems. By the end of 2014, the Chinese Government released a new plan aiming for about 75% of preschool-aged children to receive three years of education by 2016 ahead of primary schooling, which is an increase in 7.5% from the 2014 ratio (Xinhua, 2014). Such short plans on preschool education increase the momentum of the Plan. The statement jointly released by the education and finance ministries, and the National Development and Reform Commission based on the this new three-year plan indicated, “three-year preschool education should be popularized in cities, towns and economically developed rural areas; whereas the enrollment rate in less developed rural areas should be increased markedly in the next three years”.

Setting short-term plans such as three-year plan help to follow the progress of preschool education so that necessary adjustments can be made for efficiency in achieving the long-term goals. They also help local governments to put forward their own roadmap, timetable, and agenda according to their rate of enrollment, and development strategy (Chinese Scholarship Council, 2013). This is because different provinces have different enrollment rates of preschool education. In this line, some provinces set their short-term enrollment plan higher than others. For instance, by 2015, three-year early childhood education program enrollment was set 60% for Guizhou, 70% for Hebei and Sichuan, and 93% for Fujian (Zhou, 2011). These short-term plans included the goals for building, renovation, and/or expansion of private and public run early childhood education programs.

Targeting preschool subsidies for disadvantaged communities is a sound investment when public resources are limited (Brookings, 2013). The Chinese three-year plans are heightening support with a focus on providing preschool education for children from disadvantaged regions, and impoverished families. Efforts are also being made to ease the shortage of kindergartens in towns and semi-urban areas, and increase enrollment of disabled children. Moreover, the government has planned to set up a pre-school education network with government-sponsored kindergartens, and private charitable kindergartens as the main forces (Jingyue et al., 2010). Within the three-year action plan or the entire ten-year plan, the government has planned to invest large amount of money to promote early childhood education with a special emphasis in communities that currently lack public early childhood education programs (Xinhua, 2010b). For instance, the government planned to invest 2400 million RMB in Sichuan from 2011 to 2013, and 5000 million RMB in Beijing from 2011 to 2015 to build and/or renovate early childhood education (Zhou, 2011).

Therefore, linked with the three-year plan, different efforts are being made which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Cooperation between different institutions. This promotes coherence and coordination of activities, and it is advantageous in terms of objective definition, resource allocation, and similar initiatives.
- 2) Increasing support to provide preschool education for children from disadvantaged regions, and poor families. This enables to extend access to children from low socio-economic status.
- 3) Setting guidelines on kindergarten charges, and management including setting up of preschool education networks between private and government-sponsored kindergartens.
- 4) Training of teachers to be creative such as to make learning materials from the community resources, even in a very disadvantaged regions, with less expenses.

Evaluation of the Plan

By the end of 2013, China had a total of 198,553 kindergartens enrolling about 38.95 million children, rising by 17,302 (9.5%) kindergartens from 2012 (Xinhua, 2014). Besides, the number of kindergartens showed an annual average expansion of 3,637 during 2003 to 2009 and 16,044 during 2010 to 2013 (China Market Research Reports, 2015). The report

further indicated that in the year 2013, the gross enrollment rate of 3-year preschool education attained 67.5%, an increase of 3 percentage points from 2012, and 16.6 percentage points against 2009. Moreover, the number of private kindergartens had been developing faster than public ones. According to the China Market Research Reports (2016), by the end of 2015, there were 143, 500 private kindergartens accounting for 65.53% of the total number of kindergartens in the country. This figure is 1.7 % less than the total ratio of 2013 which was 67.2% (China Market Research Reports, 2015). However, the government's involvement in early childhood education by providing input, regulation of tuition fees, and support for needy families could help in providing equitable access to early childhood education in the country. One witness to this issue is the increase of government funding as main resource. In this line, central government's fiscal expenditure increased by 23.6% in 2009, and 9% in 2010 over the previous year's expenditure (Jingyue et al., 2010). This increase was initiated as part of the Plan to increase the proportion of fiscal education expenditure to total GDP, to 4% by 2012 (Xinhua, 2010a).

China is a country with diverse geographic conditions, culture, and socio-economic development levels (Zhou, 2011). This is also true with regard to early childhood education condition of the country. Due to social and economic differences such as population number, and economic development, fairly gap exists in the development of preschool education within provinces, and municipalities. In 2015, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other economically developed eastern regions showed remarkable progress with gross enrollment rate of 3-year preschool education surpassing 95% while the central and western regions such as Tibet, Yunnan, Guangxi, and Ningxia achieved only about 60% (China Market Research Reports, 2016).

Table 2. *Gross enrollment ratio (%) in the pre-primary education in China from 2006 to 2014*

Pre-primary education	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total	50.9	52.1	52.4	53.5	57.3	63.8	72.8	77.8	81.6
Female	49.2	50.3	50.6	51.9	55.9	62.7	72.7	78.1	81.7
Male	52.3	53.7	54	54.9	58.6	64.7	72.9	77.5	81.5

(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015)

The figures in Table 2 indicate that China had reached gross enrollment ratio of 81.6% by 2014. Moreover, the country has almost eradicated the gap between male and female pre-school entrants. The growth rate is also consistent with the goal of the Plan which is reaching an enrollment of 34 and 40 million children in kindergartens by 2015, and 2020 respectively. In fact, according to the data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016), China had already superseded the 2015 goal of enrolling 34 million children in 2013 by enrolling more than 36 million children in preschool education.

However, it is difficult to trace the development of early childhood education in some categories. The Plan didn't provide specific and measurable goals to track down the level of rural-urban development, and the quality of the early childhood education delivered based on the teacher-children ratio, and teachers' qualification. The same issue also applies to children with special needs education.

Conclusion

The Plan is well organized with clear objectives and indicators that could enable to assess the progress. Moreover, the additional short-term plans increase the practicability of the plan and its objectives. However, the Plan lacks detailed indicators for rural-urban levels, teacher-children ratio, and for children with special needs education.

The formulation work of the Plan was done with the direct leadership of the central government, active participation of all social sectors, and advice and suggestions from experts and scholars. To this effect, the implementation phase is carrying out with participation of different stakeholders including the public, government, and non-governmental organizations with the core principle of social justice. The Plan indicates that government investment in education will increase steadily. Besides, it shows government's dedication to lower levels of education, and disadvantaged groups of societies. With the ongoing globalization, and widening of the gap between the rich and poor communities, it is believed that more attention should be placed on the poor and disadvantaged cities and provinces in order to narrow the gap.

In conclusion, despite some gaps between provinces, and within municipalities, the Plan is progressing well. Hence, with the current momentum, the Plan will achieve its general

goals of gross attendance rate by 2020. When compared to different other plans set by international organizations such as the Millennium Development Goals, and Education for All which encompass similar goals to different countries, the Chinese national Plan has multiple advantages. It is set with the socio-economic and overall policy of the country. Therefore, China's national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development (2010-2020) is good example for many countries especially developing countries to design their own plan which fit their socio-economic development.

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