EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CHINA: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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In 2005, there were 124,400 kindergartens in China, an increase of 6,500 from the previous year. These kindergartens schooled 21,790,300 children, an increase of 896,300 from the previous year. Kindergarten principals and teachers numbered 836,100, an increase of 76,500 from the previous year.

Early childhood education in China lacks the resources available for primary and higher education. Though one of the world's nine most populous nations, China falls behind Mexico and Brazil in this regard. For instance, 39% of Mexican children and 18% of Brazilian children attend kindergarten or nursery school. In China the proportion is much lower. Early childhood education is falling behind because of the lack of incentives to attract and retain good teachers, insufficient funding, chaotic administration and disparity in educational resources.

I. Early Childhood Education

A. Exam-Oriented Teaching

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued its Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (hereafter referred to as “the Guidelines”). A training program was launched throughout China in 2002 to better implement the Guidelines. An experimental version of the Guidelines was later carried out in 15 provinces and municipalities.

However, in recent years, China’s kindergartens have become infiltrated by exam-oriented education. Children are required to take an entrance examination in order to be admitted to certain primary schools; as a result, kindergartens are required to teach what is to be tested. In particular, some private kindergartens ignore the Guidelines and provide strictly exam-oriented education in hopes of attracting more students. This approach has misled parents and misconstrued the planning behind early childhood education.
B. Haphazard Curriculum and Teaching

At present, curriculum in Chinese schools contains the following problems.

First, there is a large variety of “experimental courses” designed to teach foreign languages, arts, and early reading and writing. Sometimes an experimental course is based on foreign educational concepts, such as the Montessori teaching method. Experimental courses do not follow established tuition rates or common teaching objectives, nor do they comply with the Guidelines.

Second, there are many badly written textbooks and teaching materials. Some of the material is shoddily compiled or distributed by unlicensed, local educational administrators, confusing teachers and students alike.

Third, primary school requirements, such as English, phonetics, writing and arithmetic, are now taught in kindergarten. However, some schools take advantage of this phenomenon by classifying the school as a bilingual kindergarten, despite lacking good textbooks and capable English teachers. In some cases, the department in charge of creating and organizing kindergarten curriculum is inexperienced and does sub-par work.

Fourth, kindergarten teacher posts do not attract experienced teachers or outstanding graduates from teacher preparation schools. Teachers without specialized training are unaware of the specifics of early childhood education, instead teaching the children as if they were primary school students or adults.

The government is at fault for ignoring these and other problems concerning early childhood education and curriculum.

II. Problems in Management

A. Enterprise-Sponsored Kindergartens in Trouble

In 1995, the former State Economic and Trade Commission, the Commission of Education, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health co-authored a document encouraging surplus workers from enterprises to consider employment with social programs. Per the document, kindergartens, nursery schools, canteens, and fleets of vans must compete in the market rather than be financed
by enterprises. In the mid-1990s, kindergartens began to separate from enterprises and merge with one another. The number of enterprise-sponsored kindergartens plummeted from 28,000 in 1993 to 8,200 in 2004. The remaining kindergartens are struggling to stay afloat in a harsh market.

First, the issue of ownership for these former enterprises-sponsored kindergartens is not clear. When the enterprise no longer sponsors the kindergarten, the kindergarten is no longer a public entity, but temporarily not private either. Although certain local education departments might wish to take the reigns, it is difficult to transfer assets and incorporate the finances, staff wages, social security, and personnel information into the new owners’ books.

Second, many Chinese kindergartens are under-funded; once enterprises stop pouring in money, kindergartens have only tuition fees to depend on. Furthermore, many kindergartens have been auctioned off or are now used for other purposes, resulting in the erosion of state-owned educational assets. Since then, the quality of teaching has declined.

Even more disappointing, some kindergarten teachers lose their teaching licenses and benefits after the kindergarten becomes a private entity. When kindergartens were run by enterprises, kindergarten teachers received the same wages and benefits as primary and secondary school teachers, which attracted excellent graduates from teacher preparation schools. The faculty was well trained and the quality of education was good. At the present time, revenue generated at kindergartens is low and the teachers are paid less, so it is difficult to attract good teachers.

Enterprise-sponsored kindergartens were once the backbone of early childhood education in China. The downward spiral of the past decade has caused the decline of the entire early childhood education program. These once prosperous kindergartens are finding it difficult to survive.

B. Poor Government Supervision

As government at all levels allocates less money to put towards early childhood education, kindergartens are becoming severely under-funded. Resource allocation disparity is also a serious problem. Some kindergartens charge extra fees with little explanation. It seems the government is not watching closely enough.
In some cities, parents have been asked to pay for so-called thematic or experimental training. For instance, they are asked to pay ten thousand yuan for “innovative education” and “innovative ability training.” Some public kindergartens charge fees simply to maintain normal operations and improve teaching. Local governments in some regions have collaborated with school administrators to charge huge sponsorship fees, as high as 50,000 yuan, promising better experimental courses. Some local governments even make a profit from such illegal businesses. Several kindergartens are luxuriously decorated to provide an excuse for high sponsorship fees. Some private kindergartens successfully attract more students with reduced fees, but make up for the loss by skimping on meals for the children and employing unqualified teachers who are paid lower salaries. Unlicensed kindergartens and nursery schools with poor facilities and unregulated tuition fees are abundant throughout China.

Why is kindergarten so expensive? First, the budget provided for early childhood education is far too small. In other countries, funding for early education accounts for a much larger proportion of total funding for education. While 5.1% of the education budget is spent on early education in Brazil, 8.9% of the budget in Mexico, and 16.4% in Thailand, China spends a mere 1.2~1.3%. The amount of funding available is only 200 yuan per child; 70% of funding is given to a few model kindergartens that are used to portray an inaccurate picture of the early education system in China. In comparison, government funding does not always cover ordinary kindergartens in rural and urban areas. This reflects the resources allocation disparity of early education.

Second, early education is distorted by market-oriented concepts. Kindergarten is not compulsory in China, which unfortunately opens the floodgate of organizations wishing to capitalize on the opportunity to sell experimental textbooks or other such money-grabbing schemes.

Third, the government is not closely supervising kindergarten-pricing mechanisms. The National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security co-authored a document designed to regulate the pricing of private educational organizations, but it did not include any measures to regulate the pricing mechanism of private kindergartens, which is the largest component of all private educational organizations. The document classifies kindergartens as non-academic institutions. Kindergartens are only required to report how much and which fees they collect to “price
watchdogs” rather than to educational administrators, which makes it more difficult to supervise how services are priced.

Fourth, kindergartens must pay administrative fees to multiple departments. After being registered in the education sector, private kindergartens must register and pay service fees to many other departments, including the civil affairs office, commercial and business office, federation of people with disabilities office, and the health and disease prevention departments.

C. Hidden Peril in Kindergartens

Recently, some serious accidents that occurred in kindergartens were exposed. These accidents caused irreparable damage to the victims and their families. The following discusses this phenomenon.

1. The large number of unapproved or unlicensed kindergartens and nursery schools create numerous potential risks for children. The most notorious accidents occurred in Henan and Jiangsu provinces. After a serious accident in a rural kindergarten in Henan province in 2004, the government investigated kindergartens throughout China and exposed 4,058 unapproved schools and 2,113 dilapidated school structures. At that time, there were only 2,659 authorized kindergartens. Similar situations were present in other provinces.

2. Although most private kindergartens have been registered and approved, they are not well equipped and cannot afford the basic facilities to ensure safety. This is common in the outskirts of cities, counties, townships, and villages. Henan County has a population of 800,000, but only 3 public kindergartens; the rest are ill-equipped, private schools. Henan is not alone; this is a common phenomenon in China.

3. Although state laws and regulations have clear and detailed safety requirements, implementation of said laws is not effective. Local governments, education departments and kindergartens are not giving school safety the attention it deserves. Some community kindergartens are built near flammable or explosive facilities. Fire exits are either badly designed or blocked. School employees are not trained to use fire extinguishers or divert students from dangerous areas.
4. Government supervision is certainly lacking. Ambiguity over responsibility, administrative overlapping, rule-violating government approval, and sometimes no supervision at all add up to catastrophe. In recent years, the number of private kindergartens has surged. It has become even more important to register and supervise the newcomers and to annually investigate existing kindergartens so as to eliminate all hidden perils. However, a few local governments have overstepped jurisdiction to illegally approve private kindergartens and charge unsubstantiated fees for annual review, inspection and tax. Unfortunately, it is difficult to supervise private kindergartens and even more difficult to punish violators.

D. Lack of Adequate Supervisors

As the number of private kindergartens has surged in recent years, new problems have continued to surface. The burden on educational administrators has increased, but the number of supervisors has been disproportionately decreased. Throughout all of China’s 31 provinces, only the cities of Beijing and Tianjin have retained special organizations responsible for administering early childhood education; in the other 29 provinces, only one full- or part-time administrator remains. The situation is worse in prefecture-level city and county kindergartens, where most early education administrators have several titles and are too busy to take the time to respond to new challenges in kindergartens. At the same time, most early education administrators lack a professional background, so they are not capable of verifying the qualifications of contractors, evaluating equipment, researching teacher qualifications, taking care of registration, and effectively carrying out inspections.

E. Outdated Faculty Staffing Policies

As some levels of government do not give priority to early childhood education, faculty members lack good expectations as related to their careers. In 2005, 54.5% of early childhood education teachers were not given a title by the government, which discouraged talented teachers from entering the field. Understaffing has become a severe problem. In some cases, the number of staff is fixed, which doesn’t allow for any increase in teachers as the kindergarten expands. In other localities,
kindergarten teachers are on the same payroll as primary school teachers; due to the quota of total number of staff allowed, as the number of primary teachers increases, opportunities are lost for kindergarten teachers. In still other cases, staff members retire, but no new staff is hired. Many public kindergartens must employ temporary teachers to make up for understaffing. There can be as many as 70 students in one class, which undermines both teaching quality and safety in kindergartens.

In 1987, the former Ministry of Labor and Personnel and the State Education Commission worked out a staffing standard for full-time and boarding kindergartens, stipulating there should be one staff member for every six to seven children in full-time kindergartens, and four to five children in boarding kindergartens. This standard was developed, based on the employment policy at that time, but it was impossible to carry out. Due to rising costs of labor, even the best kindergartens cannot afford to reach this standard. Moreover, because the Department of Finance was not involved in drafting the standards, those teachers in public kindergartens whose wages are covered by government finances cannot be paid, as the standard requires.

In 2001, the General Office of the State Council sent a notice to the State Commission Office, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, decreeing that nursery schools and schools for juvenile delinquents that are affiliated with a primary school may refer to the primary school for staffing standards, and may adjust for local conditions. It did not mention private kindergartens. Due to the many differences between kindergartens and primary schools, it is not appropriate to follow the standard of the latter.

Some localities streamline staffing of public kindergartens or change teachers’ titles in the name of reforming, piloting or reducing financial burden. As a result, the teachers of public kindergartens are paid less, and some of them have been forced to find other work as a means to support themselves.

The kindergarten staffing standard must be accepted by national administrators in education, human resources and finance, must reflect the essence of early childhood education, and must be in line with China’s economic and social status quo. Unfortunately, those goals have yet to be reached.
Early childhood education in rural areas is complicated. There are nearly 60 million 3 to 6 year old children in China, yet only 21.79 million studied in kindergartens in 2005; the remaining 60% live in the countryside.

Since farmers cannot afford to pay the fees of expensive private kindergartens, public schools are the primary option in rural areas. But public kindergartens also face a dilemma: they must survive without government-sponsorship and they cannot charge any fees. More issues are outlined below.

A. In rural areas, the number of children in kindergartens has declined for eight years straight. Numbers began to decrease in 1996 and rebounded in 2004, but in 2005 the number was still lower than in 1990. The number of rural kindergartens dropped from 93,000 in 2005 to 60,200 in 2000, a decrease of 35%; the number of children in kindergartens nationwide fell by 1.46 million or 12.5%. Preschool classes shrank in size from 285,300 in 2000 to 228,500 in 2005, dropping by 19.9%. According to 2005 statistics, less than 30% of rural children aged 3-to-6 years old studied in kindergartens, a figure much lower than in cities (33.6% in 1995).

B. The number of teachers is far from sufficient, and because they are not well paid, usually do not stay long in rural kindergartens. In 2005, a given teacher had to teach 36.1 children on average, compared with the national standard of 7–8 students per teacher. Additionally, teachers in rural areas are usually not well trained. In 2004, 70% of rural kindergarten teachers had no professional title, and that proportion grew to 71.94% in 2005. Due to the low salary, most teachers do not stay more than a year in rural kindergartens, and most have received no professional training in early childhood education at all.

C. The government does not perceive that early childhood education should be a government-sponsored service. The government does not clearly define its own responsibility; rather, some localities insist that private kindergartens be responsible for their own operations. However, many villages in China are not developed enough to function as communities and private kindergartens do not have enough money to provide quality service. The central government does not budget for early childhood education and there is little or no special funding from provincial, municipal, or county governments. With no money, how
can the state address new problems, let alone assist rural and poverty-stricken areas? To make things worse, as long as teacher salaries and benefits are not improved, neither will teaching quality.

IV. What Should Be Done?

First, the government needs to look at the big picture and see where early childhood education comes in. The state should make sure kindergartens and nursery schools are no longer understaffed, underfunded, or restricted by educational policies. A new management and supervision system is expected to be launched, together with new early education legislation.

A. The government must recognize that providing early childhood education is an important part of its public services. The state should plan and supervise early childhood education, as it does the other educational programs, make human, material, and financial resources available, and formulate supporting policies to enable early education to develop.

Early childhood education requires special funding. There are nearly 60 million children aged between 3 and 6 years; in comparison, the 117,000 kindergartens currently operating in China are far from enough. Premier Wen Jiabao has said, “Government should be the main sponsor for early childhood and higher education” in rural China. As more children migrate to urban cities with their parents or, alternatively, stay in their hometowns when their parents find jobs elsewhere, they should be enrolled in kindergartens where they will be taken care of by the teachers. This indirectly helps to boost economic growth and to maintain stability within rural families and society in general.

Hebei Province, a poor, agricultural province near Beijing, has an exemplary early childhood education program. In 2001, Hebei Province announced a new goal: all children between the ages of 3 and 6 would have access to three years of preschool education. This plan makes good use of idle school facilities and surplus primary school teachers, helps townships and villages run public kindergartens, and encourages private kindergartens to compete with and complement public schools. Hebei province’s unremitting efforts resulted in a large number of newly standardized kindergartens, growing from a mere 1,307 in 2001 to 3,368 in 2004. This meant that 49.7% of children aged 3 to 6 were enrolled in
kindergartens; a drastic increase as compared with the 34.4% of three years previous. By now, 48 of China’s 172 counties provide children with access to three years of pre-school education.

B. The Chinese government has recognized the need to continue regulating kindergarten teaching activities by abandoning the exam-oriented curriculum and by discontinuing the introduction of primary school courses into kindergarten curriculum. A staffing standard should be developed to ensure there are enough teachers. Regulations are expected to be put into effect to supervise the pricing mechanisms of kindergartens, to phase out excessive school fees, and to avoid iniquitous competition. The quality of early childhood education programs in rural and poverty-stricken areas must be developed to become on par with China’s overall national conditions. In the rural early education system, public kindergartens run by townships and villages will be the mainstay, merely complemented by private schools.

China needs to clearly define, in law, the role of early childhood education and the responsibility of government at all levels to strengthen management, check the qualifications of kindergarten teachers and increase safety and sanitation levels. China should put forth new legislation for an “Early Childhood Education Law.” Other countries have already taken this step. The United States has formulated six special laws for preschool education represented by the Head Start program; the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, India, North Korea, and Taiwan developed similar laws as early as the 1970s and 1980s. In recent years, Mainland China has begun to catch up. Jiangsu, Beijing, Qingdao, Guangzhou, and other provinces have implemented regulations for early childhood education, while Shanghai and Shandong are finishing their own legislation.

Since the last State Council meeting on early childhood education in 1987, there has been no such nationwide conference. In order to reform early childhood education, it is necessary for the State Council to organize another nationwide conference to urge local authorities to adopt new policies.