

COUNTRY REPORT

Towards Modernization: Challenges for Early Childhood Education in China

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In today's society, China has realized the vital function of early childhood education and its lasting effects on a child's development throughout life. Many parents, especially parents in big cities, are willing to invest, no matter the cost, into their child's education including early childhood education. This attitude coincides with the country's current profound and speedy social changes. The central task of economic construction leads to tremendous achievements and the national strategy of vitalizing the country by developing science and education. Consequently, a gigantic project of pursuing educational modernization is gradually in the making. Meanwhile many problems remain in our education system, which certainly cannot meet the society's demands for qualified personnel at present and in the future, and therefore, calling for a deep reform in all levels of education. As the starting point of a person's educational life, early childhood education is now facing significant challenges as it leans towards modernization.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In China, early childhood education refers to the education for children from birth through age six, including kindergarten, preschool, and nursery school. Different programs provide services for children of different ages with different emphasis, while they are all excluded in the compulsory education system.

Kindergartens

Kindergartens are usually 3-year programs serving children of age three to six. The majority of kindergartens are sponsored by the Governmental Board of Education, factories, army units, and academic institutions. High-quality kindergartens are usually supported by the local government, with more qualified teachers and frequent professional supervision and is comparatively more concerned with supporting the overall development of young children. However, there are too few of these kindergartens to meet the need. We also have neighborhood-run kindergartens in cities and village-run kindergartens in rural areas. These kindergartens are often short of equipment and materials, and providing care is their primary concern. During recent years(1994), a number of private kindergartens have come into being, serving 3.2% of kindergarten children nationwide. Some of the privately operated programs serve as a business for means of profit. These programs consider expensive equipment, luxurious rooms and high fees as a priority rather than educational effectiveness of promoting young children's development.

In 1995, there were about 180,000 kindergartens all over the country with 27,110,000 children. Rural kindergartens made up 70% of the total, while city kindergartens made up 15.2% and country/town kindergartens 13.9%. This reflects not only the agricultural nature of the country, but also the rising concern for collective care and education of young children in rural areas. Due to the unbalance in economic development within the country, significant differences exist in material conditions as well as the quality of care and education in kindergartens among urban and rural kindergartens in China.

Preschool Classes

Most preschool programs are affiliated to elementary schools and enroll 5 to 6 year-olds. The essential aim of the one year preschool program is to provide educational opportunities for children who might not have received any collective care and education prior to entering elementary schools, therefore, preparing children for school.

Compared to kindergarten programs, preschool classes lay more emphasis on teaching preschool skills, such as math, the phonetic alphabet(pin yin) and even Chinese characteristers, while kindergarten children might spend more time in outdoor physical play, music, art, science and social studies, and oral language practice. Due to the influence of Chinese traditional cultural values, many