

# Early Childhood Education Curriculum Reform in China

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the curriculum reform in Chinese early childhood education (ECE) and is separated into five sections. There is a clear rationale for selecting this reform as well as a description of the reform. While it is clear that the reform has advantages, significant shortcomings have been highlighted in the essay. The promotion of diverse and autonomous curriculum development and implementation was a successful outcome of the Chinese ECE curriculum reform. Individualism in curriculum creation and a more child-centered approach have been effectively established by Chinese ECE reform. It was very challenging for teachers to apply the reform's new curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom, nevertheless, because it did not start with professional training and did not account for Chinese kindergarten teachers lacking expertise. Additional policy recommendations are also presented at the end. It is advised to use a mix of top-down and bottom-up policies to enhance the way curriculum reform is implemented in Chinese ECE.

**Keywords:** Chinese Kindergarten, Curriculum Reform, Early Childhood Education, "Open-Door" Policy.

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## 1. Introduction

As the "open door" policy ushered in a new age of economic prosperity, the 1980s were dubbed "the return of spring" for China's economy (Qi & Melhuish, 2017, p. 270). Following the "open door" policy, also came the recovery of education in China, which served as the backdrop for Chinese ECE curriculum reform in 1980s. Chinese ECE was on the mend after being injured during the "Chinese Cultural Revolution" (Li, 2009). During 1980s, Chinese ECE experienced remarkable growth, with the number of kindergartens and kindergartners skyrocketing (Li et al., 2016).

With the entry of foreign educational philosophies in addition to economic progress, the most current wave of ECE curriculum reform began in the 1980s. More specifically, Chinese experts have introduced and tested a wide range of educational ideas and curriculum models from industrialized countries (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). For example, a few theories such as "the Montessori method" and "the project approach" were imported and supported by Chinese researchers (Li et al., 2012, p. 605). Consequently, the latest wave of Chinese ECE curriculum reform began in the 1980s and was declared as an idea innovation (Liu & Feng, 2005), having greatly modified traditional concepts in Chinese culture. In contrast to the local communist culture, the newest wave of reform viewed Chinese ECE curriculum as critical to encouraging "individuality, autonomy, problem-solving, friendship and cognitive development in children" (Zhu & Zhang, 2008, p. 175). Li (2005) suggests that education is a complicated topic in and of itself, but it gets even more so when local culture collides with global influences. To deal with the complicated relationship between the local culture and global influences, Chinese educational system integrates curriculum models and ideas from other countries into local practice (Li & Chen, 2017).

Throughout the 1980s, Chinese educational system underwent various changes to better satisfy society's and the global market's evolving needs. Since the 1980s, a series of spontaneous experiments have been carried out in various parts of the country (Zhu, 2009). Amid this trend, Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) took the lead to guide the

reform on the entire national curriculum. To restore order and build a firm platform for the greater growth of ECE in China, a number of regulations and guidelines were released (Li et al., 2016). Among them, the most influential one was "Regulations on Kindergarten Work", which spread widely across the whole country, and the regulations of the reform were implemented at all levels (MOE, 1989a). As a result, kindergartens were more regulated, and the focus of program shifted from custodial care to a balance of care and instruction (Zhu & Wang, 2005).

The ECE curriculum reform not only regards ECE as a preparatory stage of the primary school, but promotes the development and well-being of children through the innovation of curriculum models and educational ideas (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). The Chinese government and the public attach great importance to the young child's personal development and the realization of their potential. The committee provided progressive policies in its 1989 statement, emphasizing personal and problem-centered ways to identify and realize the potential of students (Eisner, 1992). In the past, Chinese ECE was often regarded as preschool education. Preschool education was not included in the Chinese educational system, unlike countries such as the United Kingdom and France that provide the universal preschool childcare in their educational systems (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). They also pointed out that ECE in China used to be patchy with inadequate care for children between 0 and 3 years old (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). Because of the reform, Kindergarten is no longer merely a location to drop off kids when their parents are busy but has also become a place to put curriculum reform into reality in order to improve teaching and student learning. Given the importance of curriculum as emphasized by Li et al. (2011), the Chinese ECE curriculum reform is necessary for improving the quality of ECE and the entire educational system.

With regard to the unique significance of this reform, it has the potential to improve people's livelihoods while realizing the well-being and potential of all young children. For those whose career goal is to become a preschool teacher and contribute to the improvement of Chinese ECE system, the ECE curriculum reform is of great interest.

## 2. Explaining the “Year Zero” for this Reform.

1989 when the fundamental proposals - “Regulations on Kindergarten Work” and “Regulations on Kindergarten Management” were released by The State Education Committee is the “Year Zero” for Chinese ECE curriculum reform (MOE, 1989a, 1989b). It is in this year that ECE was officially established as the cornerstone of the Chinese educational system, with the objective of providing care and instruction for young children and assisting them in being suitably prepared for primary school (MOE, 1989a, 1989b). Also, a series of innovative ideas of the reform were highlighted by the regulations: “‘respecting children’, ‘active learning’, ‘teaching for individual learning needs’, ‘play-based teaching and learning’, ‘teaching and learning through daily life in kindergartens’” (Liu & Feng, 2005, p. 94). Furthermore, the regulations established the foundation for ECE legislation and policy impact in China. These two proposals lay the legal basic framework for guaranteeing kindergartens’ legal rights and interests, confirming the duties and roles of governments, societies, and relevant departments (Zhu, 2006). To make the management system for local authorities and administrators at all levels more clear, the regulations, according to Qi & Melhuish (2017), assign “responsibility for implementation at the provincial, regional and local levels” (p. 270). Eventually, the requirements of the reform were applied at different levels of governmental authorities and kindergartens through policy documents (Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

## 3. A Description of the Reform and How it Evolved into Policy.

The curriculum reform of ECE in China has gradually evolved into a policy in the process of conducting localized innovation and adapting to the experience of other countries. Seriously influenced by the ongoing social transformation in China, ECE curriculum reform reflects the interaction between Chinese relevant political, economic and social changes (Li & Chen, 2017). Speaking of the main process of its evolution, “there have been three major eras of early childhood (EC) curriculum reform, in the 1920s–1930s, in the 1950s, and from the 1980s to the present time” (Zhu & Zhang, 2008, p. 174). Any period of reform is influenced by major social changes in China and relevant political, economic and cultural factors (Li, 2009). For example, in the 1920s-1930s stage, the reform was affected by cultural shifts of the “May Fourth Movement” as an anti-imperialist policy calling for opposition to conventional culture and using “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” ideals (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1472). During this period, Li (2009) found that the curriculum model influenced by American democratic thought has been popular and extensively used in Chinese kindergartens. Chinese educators learned a more democratic model from the American educator - John Dewey and advocated a more child-centered, game-centered, and life-centered educational theory (Zhu, 2009). Before the 1920s, Chinese curriculum approaches were just imitated from other nations, so that they were difficulty adapted to Chinese socio-cultural contexts (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). John Dewey’s educational theory helped Chinese educators develop the first innovation of ECE curriculum appropriate for the Chinese local situation. In 1923, two Chinese educators, Chen Heqin and Zhang Zonglin,

were the pioneers in this innovation process. They have tried to pilot a “uniquely Chinese curriculum” named “unit-based integrated curriculum”, shifting from “the traditional model of an adult-centred, classroom-centred and unauthentic learning experience” to “a more democratic model of a child-centred, play-centred and life-centred learning experience” (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1473). In sum, between the 1920s and 1930s, “May Fourth Movement” promoted the anti-tradition innovation of Chinese early childhood curriculum that called for a more democratic model.

Lately, during the 1950s, the reform was influenced by the political changes triggered by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. At that time, as the socialist partner and role model of PRC, the reform of China’s education system naturally learned from the Soviet Union (Li, 2009). PRC established socialism as the main political thought. To fully remove the impact of non-socialist ideologies in the classroom, Chinese ECE abandoned previously adopted curriculum (Wang & Mao, 1996). At that time, since the “unit-based integrated curriculum” advocated by the United States indicates capitalism, the Chinese government believed that the Soviet curriculum was the world’s only politically correct curriculum (Li, 2009). So, Chinese MOE released “Interim Regulations on Kindergarten” and “Provisional Regulations on Kindergarten Curriculum” as formal policy documents to advocate the subject-based curriculum (MOE, 1952a, 1952b). The syllabus included six subjects: physical education, language, art, music, mathematics and environmental learning, “valued knowledge and skills and highlighted the roles of classroom teaching and homework learning” (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1474). In sum, the subject-based curriculum implemented in the second period was due to the establishment of the PRC and Chinese unique political ideology - socialism.

Afterwards, the ECE curriculum in China experienced challenges and was forced to stall. From 1966 to 1976, during the “Chinese Cultural Revolution”, all teachers were dispatched to distant places for labor, so that kindergartens were forced to close down and young children could not successfully receive ECE (Li, 2009). Until 1979, the document - “Guidelines on Kindergarten Education (draft)” was released by MOE, continuing the policy of 1952 and expanding the original six subjects to eight (MOE, 1979). However, the Soviet Union’s “subject-based curriculum model” appeared unsuitable for Chinese rapidly growing market economy (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1471). Therefore, the Chinese government has borrowed the curriculum model from American education system since 1978 when the country was reopened to the outside world (Zhu, 2009).

Last but not least, under the influence of the “open door” policy in 1978, the reform of ECE curriculum after the 1980s was implemented in a top-down manner (Li et al., 2011). The National Education Commission (the former Chinese MOE) released “Regulations on Kindergarten Work” in 1989, kicking off the first formal wave of Chinese ECE curriculum reforms. Liu & Feng (2005) suggest that the reform emphasizes educational ideas influenced by the United States, adopting a “play-based” curriculum and using student-centered pedagogy (p. 96). Zhu & Zhang (2008) note that the document endorsed the initial goal in early childhood curriculum - “face the world, the future, and modernization” under the popularization of “open door” policy (p. 174). However, without relevant professional education and policy recommendations for implementation to support the new

regulations issued in 1989, kindergarten instructors had no advice on how to execute the early childhood curriculum (Li et al., 2011). The progressive educational ideas from another educational system were challenging for Chinese teachers to apply for their failing to be consistent with Chinese traditional education ideas. Traditional ideals such as obedience to authority and maintaining unity, for example, ran counter to “a democratic and equilateral relationship between the teacher and the individual child” (Chen & Li, 2017, p.1475). Subsequently, Chinese MOE (2001) issued the additional “Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice” to meet the need for further guidance for practitioners on how to apply the new educational ideas to the Chinese reality. Except for the national top-down reforms, some Chinese educators have created their own localized curriculum models during this period. For example, Zhu’s “theme-based curriculum” represented a progressive educational method (Zhu & Zhang, 2008, p. 175). Furthermore, Li’s “story approach to integrated learning” was “a postmodern narrative curriculum” (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1475).

In summary, the innovation of curriculum models was mainly from unit-based to subject-based and play-based, with the localized implication of new progressive educational ideas. China’s educational techniques have grown increasingly diversified and associated with the more globalized world as a consequence of its constant attempts to innovation with various curriculum models in ECE curriculum reform (Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

#### **4. An Argument to Analyze its Successes and Shortcomings.**

First of all, Chinese ECE curriculum reform succeeded in promoting diverse and autonomous curriculum development and implementation. According to “Regulations on Kindergarten Work” (MOE, 1989a), the emphasis in ECE should shift from consistent curriculum standards to diverse and autonomous curriculum design. This policy document brought two requirements for the reform: autonomy and diversity. Obviously, the implementation of kindergarten curriculum is reflected in various curriculum practices with different curriculum models. For example, Li (2004) developed the Story Approach to Integrated Learning (SAIL) while the school-based curriculum was also developed in Chinese kindergartens. SAIL is an integrated curriculum that employs transdisciplinary teaching methodologies and utilizes stories as the framework (Li & Chau, 2010). Li & Chen (2017) argued that the borders between the “subject-based” and the “unit-based” curriculum were broken in Chinese kindergartens by developing the “school-based” curriculum (p. 1475). Also, Chinese educators borrowed various Western curriculum approaches and adapted them for Chinese kindergartens. “Different curricula such as the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia and Montessori have been widely adopted and localized” (Zhu, 2009, p. 54). Furthermore, the Story Approach to Integrated Learning (SAIL) was also established in Hong Kong. According to Yang & Li (2018), SAIL was adopted and implemented into the SBC of HK1-KG, which incorporates diverse pedagogical approaches, numerous topics, and rich activities. In short, Chinese educators successfully implement various curriculum models and approaches in Chinese kindergartens to meet the 1989 policy document’s diversity requirements.

To meet the autonomy requirements of 1989 policy

document, a school-based curriculum model have been developed and independent management power have been spread to various kindergartens. Since the early 2000s, several Chinese societies have called for School-Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) as a decentralization and empowerment movement in ECE curriculum decision-making (Gopinathan & Deng, 2006; Li, 2005, 2006). The impact of key individuals should be taken into consideration and the personal leadership of kindergarten principals has played an important role in the process. The leader in the Hong Kong kindergarten acted as the role model, school administrator, and curriculum and pedagogy supervisor, while other stakeholders (teachers, assistants and parents) preferred to follow the leader’s guidance (Ho, 2011). Yang (2019) also proved that kindergarten leaders performed a variety of roles in various stages of ECE curriculum innovation. In addition, the case study by Yang (2019) discovered that all chosen kindergartens had written a textbook manual or a monograph that clearly stated and thoroughly presented the framework and basic components of their own curriculum. The document would allow the professional educator to examine the processes of curriculum development and reflect on the current curriculum for further improvement (Yang, 2019). To summarize, the autonomous curriculum development in Chinese ECE was associated with the implementation of school-based curriculum.

Second, Chinese ECE reform has successfully developed more children-centered approach and individualism in the curriculum development. Following the child-centered approach means that the curriculum should encourage students’ personal and social potential instead of educating them through the assigned subject (Yang & Li, 2019). The reform successfully promotes significant principles such as valuing children and involving children in active learning, as well as educating for individual learning requirements (Liu & Feng, 2005). Similarly, Zhu & Zhang (2008) revealed that the objectives of the reform included respecting child-initiated activities and focusing on individual variations. Their common focus is on the individuality of young children and their active learning activities. Chinese conventional culture prioritized the community over the individuals and encouraged extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation (Liu & Feng, 2005; Tobin, 2005). Since collectivism was replaced by individuality and extrinsically driven learning was replaced by child-initiated and active learning, the reform resulted in an idea innovation of conventional culture and educational principles. Zhu (2009) further defined individuality as one of the major purposes of ECE curriculum reform after the 1980s. Requiring individuality leads to the emphasis on more individualized schooling in Chinese kindergartens. Since the 1980s, modernization tendencies in China have emphasized the adoption of progressive ideals from Western countries, including individualized schooling, children’s rights, the promotion of independence and creativity among children (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). Chinese kindergartens placed a great focus on children’s personal learning and development. In interviews conducted by Yang & Li (2019), both educational leaders claimed that they had developed numerous techniques to drive curriculum development and create individualized learning courses.

By contrast, although the reform made progress in developing diverse and autonomous, children-centered individualized curriculum, its shortcomings are obvious as

front-line teachers working in Chinese kindergartens were not consulted. To apply the new curriculum, kindergarten instructors should work harder than just implementing the prescribed curriculum, because teachers are in charge of both curriculum planning and implementation (Zhu, 2009). More studies, however, have revealed that the perspectives of kindergarten teachers were not valued in the reform. As a result of the reform's top-down approach, policies and principals were created without involving or consulting Chinese front-line instructors (Li & Chen, 2017). The reform's top-down approach should also be criticized for forcing teachers to change. The top-down method triggered changes in the demand of practitioners whose engagement in formulating the changes resulted in the abandonment of their own traditional beliefs and skills (Liu & Feng, 2005). Prior to the reform in the 1980s, Chinese front-line instructors were accustomed to traditional educational concepts and skills. Many kindergarten teachers and administrators who were familiar with the traditional "subject-based curriculum" and "teacher-centered pedagogy" found it very difficult to adapt the new curriculum and pedagogy (Zhang & Zhu, 2017, p. 109). Teachers were not ready for the reform. Eventually, they lost their passion and confidence in making changes in teaching as a response to the reform in practice since they were not consulted (Liu & Feng, 2005).

Furthermore, without being properly prepared and professionally educated for the reform, Chinese ECE instructors were not competent to cope with the curriculum shift throughout the reform. A successful reform should begin with efficient teacher education programme, because curriculum change would be worthless if instructors were unable to execute it effectively (Li & Chen, 2017). Historically, Chinese preschool teachers lacked professional qualifications. Kindergarten teachers in China have always been seen as babysitters rather than instructors or educators. Because of their poor entrance professional qualifications, their professional identities were not widely acknowledged by society (Zhang & Yu, 2017). Some researchers observed the significance and necessity of professional training and guidance. According to Freidson (2001), professionalism allows instructors to build a feeling of self-direction, autonomy, and independence. In the lack of professional direction, Wang et al. (2019) contend that Chinese kindergartens are compelled to "ride a blind horse" while establishing curriculum. Teacher education and professionalism are critical to the success of Chinese ECE curriculum reform. Teachers' roles are important to achieve the reform change since they are directly accountable for curriculum implementation (Chen et al., 2017). Thus, reform leaders should take into account Chinese teachers' degrees of professional expertise. However, Chinese kindergarten educators have been accustomed to the "subject-based" curriculum and pedagogy for a long time since "Interim Regulations on Kindergarten" and "Provisional Regulations on Kindergarten Curriculum" were issued (MOE, 1952a, 1952b). Because they have been accustomed to the "subject-based" curriculum in the long term, some teachers resisted the changes caused by reform and found them difficult. Being "faithful technical executors of standard prepared curriculum", many kindergarten instructors were resistant to modify and found it hard to shift their customary practice (Zhang & Zhu, 2017). Furthermore, teachers had to face the reform's adjustments in curriculum and pedagogy. Specifically, teachers have been asked to conduct play-

integrated curriculum since 1989, but they had not taken professional training before the reform and were not ready for this radical transformation in teaching (Li et al., 2011). As a result of the discrepancy between the abilities of instructors and the qualification requirements of the new curriculum model, the curriculum reform has been mainly ineffective in reality. Although teachers were exposed to and gained information about preschool teaching and learning thoughts and concepts, such information was not immediately and successfully put into everyday practice (Chen et al., 2017). There are two gaps in the reform: the gap between policy and practice and the gap between belief and practice (Li et al., 2011). Teachers believed in conventional educational ideals like drilling, remembering, and punishing instead of creativity, thinking, and individualism (Li et al., 2012), yet they were challenged to put the latter into practice. In other words, the policy-practice gap occurs when policies are difficult to implement in practice. Although the government tried to make the guidelines more precise, they remain rather vague for teachers, leaving no clear instructions on how to conduct in practice (Zhang & Zhu, 2017). To summarize, the reform failed to take into account Chinese untrained kindergarten teachers and did not begin with professional training, making it extremely difficult for teachers to implement the reform's new curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom.

## **5. Policy Recommendations for How the Reform Might be Strengthened or Ameliorated.**

"Neither a top-down nor a bottom-up policy approach" is appropriate for improving Chinese ECE curriculum (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1480). Li et al. (2011) suggest that the ideal approach appears to be the use of a hybrid strategy that combines the benefits of both. According to Liu & Feng (2005), there are three components in ECE reform: structure, process, and belief, and the third component - belief can shift the conventional ideas that have been used in the kindergarten classroom practice. Changing the theoretical framework of curriculum is relatively simple by using a top-down method, while improving the teaching and learning activities needs a bottom-up method to enhance teachers' and students' collaboration (Li & Chen, 2017). Kagan & Hallmark (2001) advocate for a type of joint leadership to improve cooperation and collaborative achievement in the Chinese ECE classroom teaching-learning activities. Sims et al. (2015) further suggest that valid leadership is decentralized rather than top-down. To achieve a child-centered, individualized teaching and learning process, Chinese early childhood educators and policy-makers should be obliged to investigate children's experiences, preferences, and needs, as well as engage children in teaching and learning process that instructors and children jointly carry out (Zhu, 2009). Furthermore, Li & Chen (2017) recommend that the bottom-up method could have a better possibility of encouraging kindergarten teachers' understanding of proposed reforms and adjustments, as well as how they might be executed. The assumption is that power-sharing among kindergarten teachers and students will encourage their full involvement to make decisions and improve quality in ECE (Ho, 2012). Therefore, a combination of top-down and bottom-up policy is recommended for improving the implementation of curriculum reform in Chinese ECE.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ECE curriculum reform after the 1980s is the most recent wave of Chinese ECE curriculum reform after the “open-door” policy, associated with economic changes. It is possible to conclude that the reform was successful in generating a diversified and autonomous, children-centered individualized curriculum. However, it was discovered that the reform has the shortcoming that front-line instructors were not consulted and prepared enough for the change in curriculum and pedagogy. Policy suggestions would be based on top-down and bottom-up approaches to better implement improvements in the teaching and learning process.

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