



# On the road to universal early childhood education in China: A financial perspective



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## ABSTRACT

In 2010, China embarked on an ambitious goal to expand early childhood education (ECE) nationwide. An integral part of this plan was to substantially expand public institutions, particularly in rural areas. Using longitudinal finance data from a western province in China, we examine the development of ECE from 2008 to 2013. Our findings suggest that the increased investment from the government and parents anchored a rapidly-expanding public ECE sector, but this strategy became more of an extension of the existing formula, rather than a component in solving structural issues. It has kept ECE institutions underfunded compared to primary and lower secondary education, fostering other systemic issues. ECE teachers were under-compensated, and public institutions had high pupil-to-staff ratios. Public financial support only constituted less than 30% of the total investment in ECE, with most ECE institutions relying on out-of-budgetary sources such as fees and levies. This financing scheme has resulted in large inter-institutional disparity. We conclude that in order to achieve sustainable high-quality ECE in the next developmental stage, a change in the financing structure is necessary.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of early childhood development and education (ECDE) has been recognized by the educational development community worldwide. In a call for a post-2015 action plan, UNICEF's ECDE consultative group (CG) argued that quality ECDE is the key to achieving sustainable development for the next stage of poverty reduction and social development (*The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2013a*). Another CG report examined current progress in ECDE worldwide and concluded that "most governments still do not prioritize early childhood in their health, education, poverty reduction or other national plans, and many countries still lack early childhood development policies, strategic plans and laws" (*The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2013b, p. 1*). CG's proposal calls for a reduction by half of the number of children under age five who fail to reach their developmental potential (*The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development,*

*2013a*), a goal that is aligned with a framework that uses measurable indicators and actionable strategies to promote sustainable development. Undoubtedly, such a goal hinges on the ability for national governments and civil societies to work together to deliver a wide coverage of early childhood education and care to their children.

As one of the world's largest developing countries with considerably under-developed early childhood education (ECE) systems, China has historically faced major challenges with promoting early childhood education. Early childhood specialists have summarized these challenges into what is referred to as the "3A's" (*Li et al., 2010*): (1) Accessibility problem (入园难): It is very tough to get into a kindergarten, especially the public ones; (2) Affordability problem (入园贵): Kindergarten tuition fees are higher than that of universities; and (3) Accountability problem (入园差): Most private kindergartens are of very poor quality.

In 2010, an ambitious national plan put ECE under the spotlight. During that time, the Chinese central government set an ambitious goal of universalizing ECE. Historically, primary and secondary education has taken more than its fair share of public education investment (*Cai and Feng, 2006a*), which often left ECE practitioners comparing themselves to the maligned Cinderella. The 2010 plan involved an overhaul of existing funding, planning, and managing mechanisms of ECE, which aimed to significantly

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improve ECE within the education apparatus. Over the following five years, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) enrollment was substantially boosted. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE) statistics (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, n.d), by 2014, there were 209,900 ECE institutions with 40,507,000 children nationwide, an increase of 51% and 52.4% since 2009. The gross enrollment rate (GER) reached 70.5%, up from 50% in 2009. It appears that China is moving forward by setting goals and leveraging resources to achieve universal coverage of ECE, but does the national pivot to support early childhood education indicate that the once under-appreciated and under-funded phase of education has now gotten the respect and recognition that it deserves? We examined lessons learned during the post-2010 developmental process.

In this paper, we look at the financing component of ECE in China. We aim to understand not merely the distribution of financial resources, but also the implications of financing ECE quality. While finance is widely regarded as a building block of a high-quality ECDE system (UNICEF, 2011), little empirical research has been devoted to such issues in China. We probe into this issue using school-level administrative data from one of most diverse and densely populated provinces in China.

## 2. A historical review of ECE in China

In China, early childhood education is provided by kindergartens for children 3–6 years-old. ECE in China has always suffered from major systemic problems of quality and sustainability. Prior to 2010, ECE in China went through two separate downward developmental cycles due to political turbulence and government mismanagement (Li et al., 2016). The first cycle was a chaotic period from 1958 to 1977 when the country went through the “Great Leap Forward” (1958–1960) and the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976). During this period, most kindergartens were closed down while children were sent home, and teachers were sent to re-education through laboring (Li and Wang, 2008).

During the second cycle from 1994 to 2009, government-privatized kindergartens had shifted the responsibility of funding ECE to the private sector or non-governmental organizations. After deciding on the private sector as the main ECE provider, Chinese government organizations encouraged NGOs and private providers to take over existing public institutions. Many public kindergartens were spun off their public sector affiliates and converted into market-driven and self-funded private institutions. This move put the remaining public kindergartens in a very disadvantaged position. The central government only allocated a fraction of total education funding to ECE, which accounted for less than 1.3% of the entire national educational budget (Cai and Feng, 2006a). The extreme lack of financial resources seriously impeded ECE in China (Li and Wang, 2008; Zhu and Wang, 2005). Due to lack of financial investment, the ECE workforce has low status and poor training. Many qualified teachers chose to leave the profession as unprofessional and untrained teachers filled in newly emerged private kindergartens. Li and Wang (2008) coined the term “silent revolution” to describe this cycle of ECE. In two decades, Chinese kindergartens moved from a public dominated system to a privately dominated one. This cycle has left a negative impact on both the quality and quantity of ECE in China (Cai, 2008; Li and Wang, 2008).

By 2010, ECE in China was plagued by the aforementioned 3A's problems. There were many factors that contributed to these issues, among which was the lack of a fair and adequate funding system (Li et al., 2016). To solve these problems, the Chinese State Council issued two important policy directives in Communist Party of China Central Committee and State Council, 2010: *The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform*

and *Development (2010–2020)* (hereinafter referred to as “the Plan”), and the *Several Views on the Development of Preschool Education by the State Council* (hereinafter referred to as “the Views”).

Three development missions and strategic goals were set by the Plan and the Views. First, the basic universality of ECE: By 2020, the GER for those taking 3-years of ECE must be 70%. Second, clarity of government responsibilities: Even though ECE is non-compulsory, it shall be mainly funded, planned, and managed by the government. Furthermore, greater efforts should be made to develop public kindergartens and to support non-governmental ones. Teachers' social status, salaries, and benefits as well as the quality of ECE programs shall be guaranteed by relevant laws. Finally, the third mission dictated the strengthening of ECE in rural areas: All the children left behind by parents working away from their home villages shall have access to kindergartens. Rural ECE resources shall be replenished by all means (Li et al., 2016).

## 3. Financing ECE in China

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, ECE was regarded as welfare for workers and public officers. The responsibility of financing ECE thus fell on state-owned enterprises (SOE), government departments at various levels, and collectives (Zeng, 2005; Cai, 2008). As a result, few resources were deployed from fiscal appropriation. Starting in the 1980s, when SOE and the public sector underwent a series of structural reforms, ECE institutions were jettisoned from their previous affiliations and driven to the education market. A burgeoning private ECE sector emerged during this period, which was entirely self-funded (Cai and Feng, 2006).

Both the Plan and the Views envisioned a universal ECE that would be jointly supported by both public and private systems. In addition to pledging more financial input from the central government, local governments were also asked to fairly distribute public funding for ECE by subsidizing the education of young children from poor and needy families and prioritizing the development of ECE in rural and western areas. For instance, educational authorities jointly invested 50 billion RMB (around 7.26 billion USD) into ECE from 2011 to 2015 to support ECE in the rural areas of central and western China.<sup>1</sup> But given the historically low level of investment in ECE, with the ECE budget typically constituting less than 2% of the total national education budget (Hong and Chen, 2016), such a bold investment plan will still have a significant financial gap to fill in an order to reach the level of OECD countries (OECD, 2013).

The funding structure of ECE is very different from primary and lower secondary education which are streamlined and less variable across schools. For ECE, not only is there a smaller proportion of government funding overall, but even at the school level, some schools receive more financial support than others, a discrepancy that is most evident between urban and rural ECE schools. This is because urban ECEs have long been regarded as welfare provided by large state-owned enterprises (SOE) to its workers (Yang, 2015). ECEs with ties to government agencies or SOEs not only receive education appropriation from public finance sources, but also internal subsidies from these affiliated institutions. Rural ECEs on the other hand, do not enjoy dual sources of revenue (Cai and Feng, 2006b). In the past few years, public funding for rural ECEs has gradually increased, but there has not been systematic evidence that rural ECEs have benefited from the overall boost of public investment post-2010. Whether there is a significant urban/rural gap in ECE funding in China post-2010 is one of the questions to be

<sup>1</sup> Based on exchange rate as of November 25, 2016, 100 RMB = 14.53 USD.

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