
Issues on Kindergarten to Primary School Transition Policy in China Since 2010: A Literature Review

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Abstract

A comprehensive and systematic study of the content of the early childhood education policy is the foundation of reflecting on the scientific nature of the early childhood transition policy. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), Chinese transition policy has been through three stages, namely the period of one-way responsibility for kindergartens (1949-1988), the period of dual-direction responsibility for kindergartens and primary schools (1989-2009), and the period of multiple stakeholders' responsibility (2010 to present). China's young children have been linked to the transition policy in terms of four aspects: implementation subjects, goals, measures and guarantee from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school (PS). Scaffolding by Smith's implementation process model, the author has examined 30 articles to summarize the characteristics of transition policy from 2010 in China, and found that the transition policy only pay attention to solving superficial problems with noncomprehensive objectives and limited measures. In the future, early childhood transition policy should be improved by four aspects in terms of the idealization of the policy, the implementation agency, the target group, and the environment factors in China.

Keywords: Transition Policy, early childhood education, primary school, review

1. Introduction

The connection between kindergarten and primary school is an important stage in the transition of children from the early school age to the school age. A scientific and orderly transition will facilitate children's adaptation to the life of primary education and provide a solid foundation for their future learning and development (Fisher, 2020). Since the formation of the People's Republic of China, the central and local governments have enacted a succession of education policies aimed at standardizing and directing the relationship between early childhood education (ECE) and primary school (PS), with certain effects. In reality, however, issues such as the unscientific concept of transition, the poor method for linking, and the absence of logic mechanism in the curriculum and assessment.

In recent years, some research on transition policy in China have made some contributions. For instance, some studies have indicated that the lack of reasonable policy support has increased

the difficulty of governance about the primary school characteristics in kindergartens by adopting Non-cooperative Game Theory (Guo & Li, 2022). Some researchers have paid attention to the analysis of the background significance of China's current transition policy (Li, 2022). Other studies have argued that, from the perspective of the "Start from Zero" teaching policy, a more scientific policy for connecting children and primary schools should be formulated to answer the question of what type of preparation children should receive for schooling (Xu & Fan, 2022). Nonetheless, studies have forgotten to conduct a rigorous analysis of the policy's actual substance, which refers to the application of particular processes and criteria to examine the policy norms in the text of education policy (Liu & Zhang, 2021), being one of the most significant domains in policy research. The scientific foundation for reflecting on the design of the early childhood transition policy and for conducting an in-depth analysis of the implementation effectiveness of the early childhood transition policy is a comprehensive and systematic examination of the policy's content. This article aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis of the effectiveness of the scientific system and policy implementation of the policy on the succession of young children promulgated by the central and local governments of the People's Republic of China since the Central Committee and the local government have been paid attention to different stakeholders' responsibility.

2. Problem Statement

In accordance with the characteristics of the main body of responsibility and orientation stipulated in the text of the policy on the transition of young children since the founding of the People's Republic of China, some researchers (e.g. Liu & Zhang, 2021; Liu & Dan, 2022) divide the development of the transition policy on the articulation of young children in China into the following three periods, including the period of one-way responsibility for kindergartens (1949-1988), the period of dual-directional responsibility for kindergartens and primary schools (1989-2009), and the period of responsibility for multiple stakeholders (2010 to present). Historically, in order to help the smooth and profitable development of the transition period of young children from kindergarten to primary schools, China has successively introduced a series of early childhood transition education policies in a timely manner in line with the educational situation, which coordinate and balance the educational interests of different stakeholders in the process, such as education departments, kindergartens, teachers, parents, children, etc. It strives to escort the transition of young children from the institutional level. The policy of early childhood articulation issued by the Chinese government has been updated and optimized in a timely manner in line with the educational situation, and fruitful educational achievements have been achieved.

Although governments and various stakeholders have realized the importance of cooperation with each other and policies with fruitful educational achievements, various practical issues have turned out. The most representative one is that the superficial and practical codes of conduct of the main body of the early childhood transition policy are too vague and have not been properly solved (Liu & Dan, 2022). Furthermore, the current education policy is poorly implemented by different stakeholders, which hinders the orderly development of the transition from ECE to PS. In order to figure out why there are some conflicts among the implementation of transition policy and different stakeholders' interests, the researcher mainly adopt the

Smith's policy implementation process model. According to Smith (1973), the implementation of a policy depends on the idealization of the policy, the implementation agency, the target group, and the environment. Policymakers can use the model to minimize disruptive tensions, which may cause policy outcomes to fall short of expectations.

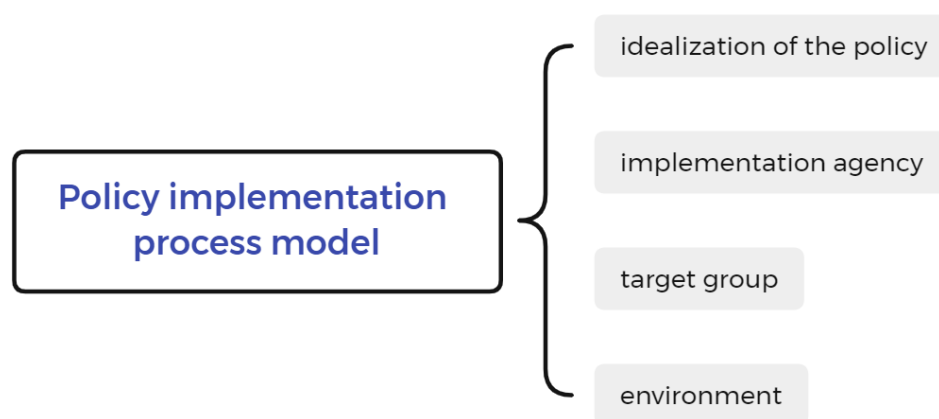
3. Method

The author undertook a review and analysis of the academic and policy literature related to the policy of educational transition from ECE to PS in China from 2010, as it can provide insights into why results are inconsistent, as well as provide a comprehensive overview of relevant research (Pont, 2020). Furthermore, it may guide future transition policy. The researcher mainly used the CNKI databases, the largest database in China, with the supplementary of the official website of Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, where all educational policies are displayed. Studies covering the period 2010 to 2022 were examined. All available significant policies and articles, both qualitative and quantitative, were reviewed comprehensively. In the course of this search, "educational policy", "implementation", "transition", "early childhood education", "primary school", "different stakeholders" have been searched as the main key terms. A selection of articles has been made based on the sensitivity of search terms after the duplication has been removed. Several exploratory methods were employed to enhance inclusivity by reviewing the titles and abstracts of the results presented in all sources.

4. Results and discussion

A full text review of the relevant articles was conducted once the relevant articles had been identified. An extensive review of the 30 selected articles was conducted based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria prescribed in the study. A thematic analysis is mainly adopted, which involves searching across a data set in order to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns. The researcher summarized and analysis the policy issues and solutions according to the four contents of Smith's policy implementation process model (Figure 1), trying to lay a foundation for finding out the problems existing in the latest transition policy of children from ECE to PS and put forward suggestions for improving the content of the transition policy.

Figure 1. Smith's policy implementation process model



Source: Smith's policy implementation process model (1973)

4.1 Issues on transition policy

This study strictly follows the frame structure of Smith's policy implementation model, analyses the four sub-elements of the policy itself, the idealization of the policy, the implementation agency, the target group, and the environment factors, and expounds the implementation dilemma faced by the current China ECE-PS transition in the implementation process, which involves the inherent limitations of the policy itself, the poor organization of the implementation agency, the loss of the identity of the target group and the mismatch between stakeholders and money in the implementation environment.

4.1.1 Idealization of the policy: Inherent limitations

The idealization of the policy is the first element of Smith's policy implementation model framework, including the basis, scientific and feasibility of policy content (Smith, 1973). From 2010 to the present, the central and local governments have promulgated a series of early childhood education policy to further strengthen the status of kindergartens and primary schools as the main subjects of early childhood education policy implementation. With the increasing prominence of the contradictions in China's early childhood transition, the inherent restrictive factors of the policy itself and the intervention in policy regulation mainly include the following two aspects:

4.1.1.1 Lacking supporting policies

In order to coordinate the balance between the interests of different stakeholders in the ecological transition system, the expression of the policy text of the should be both principled and practical. Nevertheless, some of the normative measures that are overly inclined to the principle oblique place the policy implementation, blurring the subject and object of policy implementation, and the supporting policy also lacks the supporting policies. In June 2019, the State Council of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) issued the "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Education in an All-Round Way to Improve the Quality of compulsory Education", which put forward the requirement of setting up transitional classes

in the first grade of primary schools (State Council of CPC, 2019). This policy pointed out the direction for primary schools to clarify their own main responsibilities and how to implement their main responsibilities. As the main body of implementation, the provincial government departments have not yet established a detailed system framework for the transition of kindergarten children, and lack the corresponding supporting policies such as special training for teachers, the construction of kindergarten-primary learning exchange platforms, and parent schools. Issues such as who will build the exchange platform, how to mobilize the enthusiasm of teachers' teaching, and formulate teaching and research quality evaluation standards also are not mentioned specifically (Du & Zhi, 2016).

4.1.1.2 Lacking in-depth consideration and long-term planning

The formulation of policy content should ensure the practical feasibility and foresight of internal short-term and long-term goals, in order to solve a variety of practical problems faced in ECE-PS transition in different periods. Also, the relevant government departments need to immediately issue new policies to activate the lagging indicators and break through the implementation dilemma according to the characteristics of the development of the times. For example, in December 2011, the Ministry of Education of China made the announcement on regulating kindergarten education preventing from "primary schooling" (MOE, 2011). In July 2018, the general office of the Ministry of Education promoted the implementation of removing "primary schooling" in kindergartens in terms of curriculum content, education methods, education environment, and teacher capacity (MOE, 2018). These policies are aiming to further regulate the conduct of kindergartens and establish a scientific view of school readiness. However, from a practical point of view, the "primary schooling" in kindergarten education is an extremely complex phenomenon, which is not only manifested in terms of educational content, educational methods, and educational environment, but also penetrates into all aspects of kindergarten education, which is a systematic reflection. As Yuan and Xi (2020) argued, the problem of "primary schooling" in kindergarten education is not only an educational problem, but also a social problem and a people's livelihood problem, which cannot be limited to the perspective of education analysis, but also from the social level.

4.1.2 Implementation agency: poor organization

The implementation of education policy is a comprehensive activity composed of multi-level interpretation, publicity, implementation, coordination, and supervision (Liu, Cheng, & Dong, 2021). The implementation agency is the hub for achieving the goals of policy (Smith, 2013), and the degree of attention and understanding of the organization personnel to the policy directly affects the effectiveness of policy implementation. At present, the implementation agency of Chinese ECE-PS transition policy ignores the cooperative mechanism system and governance. The implementation of the early childhood transition policy is strictly hierarchical followed by the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education, and the Education Bureau. Different understanding of policy has always been one of the main factors leading to policy distortion and implementation deviation (Li & Li, 2020). When implementing policy issued by higher-level institution, lower-level governments will regard self-interest profit and loss value

as countermeasure parameters. Due to the lack of unified management and rectification regulations, some executive entities will act negatively on the specific requirements which could cause a loss to their own interests, and deviate from the implementation trajectory of idealized policies. For instance, the Ministry of Education promulgated the "Guide to the Study and Development of Children Aged 3-6 Years" in October 2012 further refines the specific contents of the five major domains in children development, including health, linguistic, society, science, art, thus laying the foundation for determining the main indicators for the connection between ECE and PS (MOE, 2012). However, in the transition policies issued by local governments, the main indicators are not the same. Some local policies that put forward four indicators, such as social adaptability, life ability, physical fitness, and study habits, while in some localities, policies put forward five indicators, such as study habits, learning quality, learning environment, knowledge preparation, and life ability (Cai, 2022).

4.1.3 Target group: conflicts of interest among the stakeholders

The implementation of policies is heavily influenced by the target group's experience with implementing existing policies, the degree to which organizational personnel are accepted, and the level of cognition they possess of their environment, according to Smith (1973). While children's educational transition occurs in a more complex ecological systems, including kindergartens, primary schools, families and even the entire social environment, the target groups are more complex. As more target groups are involved in the implementation of education policies, conflicts of interest will increase, making it more difficult to reach agreement and lose recognition of government policies (Yu, Tu, Li, & Liu, 2019). Some conflicts are shown as follows:

4.1.3.1 Ignoring parents' participation and concern

Public participation and expression of interests are an important embodiment of the legalization of education policy decision-making (Deng & Ma, 2021). As the main stakeholders in the policy implementation process of early childhood transition, the expression of the interests of parents and children is not yet fully reflected and even marginalized in the policy text. For elementary school, "Ten Regulations for Reducing the Burdens of Primary School Students" was issued by the Ministry of Education in August 2013, which clearly put forward the requirement of implementing "starting from zero" teaching mode in the first grades of elementary school (MOE, 2013). Nevertheless, as the standard of living increases, parents are paying more attention to their children's education but with a narrow understanding of early childhood education. Parents tend to believe that their children should be ahead of their peers in word recognition, problem solving, and other abilities and regard children's early mastery of vocabulary and arithmetic as a sign of educational success (Xu, 2020). The current situation of adaptation in the first grade of primary school exposes that children lack cultivation of learning interest, promotion of physical movement and social development in both kindergartens and primary schools (Yang, 2021), reflecting the awareness deviation between policy-makers, parents, and children.

4.1.3.2 Private institutions' pursuit of profit

For some private educational institutions, in order to obtain individual and short-sighted economic benefits such as meeting the long-term expectations and requirements of the family, enhancing the competitiveness of the industry, and accelerating the improvement of students' academic and professional achievements, they ignore policies implemented by MOE like "Guiding opinions on vigorously promoting the scientific transition between kindergartens and primary schools", which promote "adhere to the child-oriented, respect for the learning interests and needs of young children" and "create a good environment for the healthy growth of children" (MOE, 2021). Adversely, they adopt passive perfunctory and deliberately distorted means to avoid the normative requirements explicitly set forth in the education policy. Parents who pay more attention to children's knowledge mastery would be attracted by these institutions. The profit these private institutions has stimulated the "primary schooling" tendency in the kindergarten (Hong & Liu, 2022). In summary, the ECE-PS transition policy circulates and depletes collective identity and support in the conflicts of interest of different stakeholders.

4.1.4 Environment: loss of human and financial resources

Education is closely related to the economy, and the local government's financial support is the economic guarantee to promote the smooth implementation of the ECE-PS transition policy (Meng & Zhang, 2014). In order to be better prepared at the practical level, the kindergarten's playing area and materials and other supporting facilities need to be improved. Furthermore, the in-course comprehensive practical activities and other experiential learning models in the enrolment adaptation class of primary school need to be implemented urgently (Xi, Cheng, & Zhao, 2020). This series of improvement is inseparable from the government's capital investment. In addition, the government's reward mechanism for the scientific implementation of the ECE-PS transition policy by educational institutions has not yet been formed. Furthermore, some organizational personnel cannot predict their own short-term benefits and long-term value after implementing the transition policy, so they would distort the implementation requirements of the ECE-PS transition policy in order to avoid potential risks and safeguard their own interests (Cheng, Dong, & Liu, 2021).

4.2 Solutions

From the perspective of Smith's policy implementation model, it can be seen from the implementation dilemma of ECE-PS transition policy in China is influenced by multiple interventions including the internal limitations of the policy itself and the external interest. Therefore, in order to get rid of the implementation deviation and other practical dilemmas of the transition policy, some suggestions on the idealization of policy, implementation agency, the target group, and the environment factors of the transition policy are promoted to explore the solution to the dilemma of the implementation of the transition policy.

4.2.1 Idealization of policy: reshape the objectives

To effectively implement the policy of early childhood articulation, the most important thing is to ensure the rationality and clarity of the policy itself, especially the policy objectives. The key contradictions that need to be solved in the transition process and the ultimate orientation behind the idealized goal should be considered comprehensively (Lian & Feng, 2019). In the past decade, the policy of transition from ECE to PS has aimed to promote the healthy growth of children, stimulate the improvement of the quality of education, and reduce the burden of students' schoolwork (Liu & Zhang, 2021). The author believes that the above objectives have their own advantages, but in general, they are all responses to the superficial problems that exist in the transition period. At the same time, proposing the goal of solving problems according to the original framework is not creative and innovative. Therefore, in the future, on the basis of the existing concern for superficial issues, the content of the policy and educational concept should be further deepened. Firstly, policymakers should identify the form and root of transition system mechanism that are clearly solidified. For instance, some educational policies proposing that kindergartens and primary schools should adhere to "two-way connection" (MOE, 2021), but in the specific policy text it is still reflected that kindergartens should mainly cater to primary schools, while no guidelines for primary schools who should take the initiative to connect with kindergartens. Second, clarifying the specific content and practice methods in the policy is helpful. For example, some education policies that put forward that "kindergartens should establish a scientific concept of child care and education" (MOE, 2018) and "parents should establish scientific parenting styles" (MOE, 2021), but these overly general expressions are not conducive to the implementation in the practice. In this sense, some supported policies addressing practical issues in the ECE-PS transition should be promoted.

4.2.2 Implementation agency: enhance governance and supervision

As the poor organization issues mentioned above, the transition policy document issued by the central government can only officially implemented after fully understanding the sub-goals of provinces, cities, counties. Governments at all levels should improve their policy leadership, comprehend the fundamental spirit of the policy documents at higher levels, make flexible adjustments according to local conditions, to avoid policy rigidity. Meanwhile, the orderly division of labour and close coordination at the middle level governments is also a significant element that affects the final implementation of policy. Meanwhile, the government should establish a complete policy supervision mechanism. In terms of inspection frequency, a regular and routine supervision mode needed to be adopted. The multi-type and multi-media supervision materials such as teaching videos, environment creation, early childhood transition research should be promoted to replace a single written text material.

4.2.3 Target group: respect and integrate interests

The transitional education for children is not a matter of reconciliation and resolution that can only be undertaken by kindergartens and/or primary schools, but is related to the overall change of a complex ecological system and the innovation of institutional mechanisms. But based on the conflicts between different stakeholders' interests, they cannot form a joint force of interests. As a result, the phenomenon of group recognition in the process of transition policy implementation has not been settled for a long time. As analysed above, some parents only pay attention to knowledge preparation, while children's internal appeal is to understand and internalize the cognitive, emotional, social interaction, learning habit adaptation to the primary school. Therefore, the policy of ECE-PS transition should strengthen the partnership status between parents and educational institutions, understand the confused problems and opinions and suggestions of parents in terms of school preparation and enrolment adaptation, in order to alleviate parents' educational anxiety. The different cognitions on school transition of kindergarten management and primary school managers hinder the interconnection and integration of kindergarten and primary school sections. Therefore, the teaching and research departments should strictly formulate teaching and research plans with years, months, and weeks as the time span to ensure the frequency and depth of communication between kindergartens and primary schools, and to dismantle the barriers of interest between the two.

4.2.4 Environment: increase investment

The government should improve the financial input mechanism, increase the financial investment input into the special governance of the transition programs, and take the full advantage of the reward policy. In order to improve the implementation environment of the transition policy, the government needs to solve the problem of insufficient resources in terms of human, material, and financial in the process of policy implementation. For example, a special fund for transition could be set up to organize teaching and research activities on the transition for kindergartens and primary school, and provide suitable venues and required materials for the comprehensive practical activities of gamification and lifelike in primary school enrolment. In addition to the continuous completion of the financial mechanism, the text of the transition policy should also be specific, so as to help the practical implementation of policy measures. Furthermore, the institutional requirements for the training objectives of educational institutions should be strengthened. The basic security systems such as teacher qualification access, training and training, welfare and treatment are supposed to be systematically established.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has successively issued relevant policies to vigorously promote the benign operation of ECE-PS transition, such as establishment of a joint teaching and research system, improvement of the home-school co-education mechanism, enhancement of the comprehensive management of the system, etc. Some issues that need to be settled have been identified in the current process of reform and development of early childhood education in China, and may continue to exist for a certain period. Scaffolded by

Smith's implementation process model, suggestions on how to improve transition policy have been provided, in terms of the idealization of the policy, the implementation agency, the target group, and the environment factors. However, this article only analyses from a theoretical level not a practical one. The specific practices and measures still rely on combined effort of the majority of front-line teachers, parents of children, and local governments, through purifying the social environment, changing people's concepts and mentalities, and ultimately promoting the solution of problems in the transition policy.

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