

Examining Changes in Preschool Education Policy since the Reform and Opening up in China: A Historical Institutionalism Perspective

Xiaofei Yu

¹School of Education, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, Shandong, China.

²Center for International Education, Philippine Christian University, the Philippines.

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Corresponding author: Xiaofei Yu, School of Education, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, Shandong, China; Center for International Education, Philippine Christian University, the Philippines.

Email: 29937884@qq.com

Abstract

After 40 years of practice and exploration and accumulation of experience in reform and opening up, the development of preschool education in China has embarked on a new journey of inheriting the past and opening up the future. The research methods and analytical paradigms of historical institutionalism can help to understand the historical changes in preschool education policies, adjust and formulate preschool education policies at present, and shape their development in the future. We found that the interaction between institutions, concepts, and interests is a key factor in the change of preschool education policies in China. To promote the development and improvement of preschool education policies, we must attach importance to the study at the conceptual level and the promotion and dissemination of new concepts. Policy makers are advised to adopt a gradual change model, and attention should be paid to the “threshold effect” of the contradictions between the inside and outside of the preschool education policy to avoid destructive ruptures in the system; When studying and formulating preschool education policies, the changes that may be caused by preschool education policies as independent variables and dependent variables should be considered.

Keywords

Preschool Education Policy, Historical Institutionalism

1. Introduction

Historical institutionalism is a theory that emerged in the field of political science in the 1970s and 1980s, advocating the study of institutions using historical methods. Historical institutionalism believes that human reasoning has limitations, so political decision-making may be wrong, and examining the history of institutional occurrence and change is conducive to better understanding and understanding of institutions, so as to overcome the limitations of rational decision-making. Preschool education policy is the top-level design of preschool education by the government, and is the guidance and basis for preschool education practice activities. Since the reform and opening up, under the norms and guidance of preschool education policies, China's preschool education has undergone earth-shaking changes and achieved world-renowned achievements. After 40 years of practice and exploration and accumulation of experience in reform and opening up, the development of preschool education in China has embarked on a new journey of inheriting the past and opening up the future. At the starting point of the new journey, using the method of historical institutionalism and analysis paradigm to study preschool education policies is not only conducive to a deep understanding of the logic of the occurrence and development of preschool education policies, and grasps the laws of system formation and

change, but also is of great benefit to thinking about the future trend of preschool education policies and leading the future preschool education reform.

2. The changes in preschool education policies since the reform and opening up

2.1 From the beginning of reform and opening up to the mid-1980s: the initial construction of the preschool education policy system

The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978 established the ideological line of emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts, making it clear that the focus of the work of the party and the state should be shifted to socialist modernization, and making a great policy decision on reform and opening up. In the wave of reform and opening up, preschool education ushered in the spring of development. From the beginning of reform and opening up to the mid-1980s, the main feature of the development of preschool education policy was to focus on restoring preschool education and initially building a preschool education policy system. Specifically, it includes the following aspects:

First, the status and nature of preschool education was clarified. “Early childhood education is an integral part of the cause of socialist education” (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999), “The healthy growth of a person is the period of foundation laid by childhood”, “The early upbringing of infants and young children is necessary to lay the foundation for the cultivation of human resources and is also necessary to greatly improve the scientific and cultural level of the entire Chinese nation” (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999).

Second, a management system for preschool education was built. In 1978, the Ministry of Education set up a special education department for preschool education in the Department of General Education, which enabled the cause of preschool education to have a relatively special administrative leadership institution after experiencing the turmoil of the “Cultural Revolution”. Some provinces (municipalities and autonomous regions) have also set up administrative leadership and teaching and research institutions for preschool education, clarified the division of responsibilities, and established a preschool education management system jointly managed by government leaders and jointly managed by various departments (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Civil Affairs, China Women’s Federations, China National Committee for the Protection of Children, etc.) (Pang & Hong, 2012).

Third, provisions were made for kindergarten childcare and education. The “Health Care System for Nurseries and Kindergartens” in 1980 and the “Guiding Outline for Kindergarten Education (Trial Draft)” in 1981 depicted the physical and mental characteristics of preschool children, determined the content, principles and methods of education, and specific provisions were made on health care and safety in nurseries and kindergartens.

Fourth, preschool teacher policies were formulated. The Trial Draft of the Teaching Plan of Early Childhood Normal Schools in 1980 and the Teaching Plan of Early Childhood Normal Schools in 1985 stipulated the training plan, appointment qualifications, treatment, and working principles of kindergarten teachers.

Fifth, the government paid attention to the development of preschool education and attached importance to rural preschool education. Adhering to the principle of “walking on two legs” in private and public kindergartens (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999), on the basis of vigorously developing public parks, the enthusiasm of factories and mining enterprises and social forces were mobilized to jointly promote the development of preschool education. In rural areas, the government encouraged the establishment of kindergartens in various forms and through various channels, and advocated carrying out preschool education according to the actual conditions of economic and cultural development in various localities (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999).

2.2 From Mid-1980s to Mid-1990s: Development and Systematization of Preschool Education Policies

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the scope of preschool education policies in China was further expanded, the content was further refined, and it moved towards a systematic, scientific, and humanistic direction.

The preschool education policies introduced at this stage mainly include: the overall planning of preschool education, which was contained in some government documents, such as the Outline of China’s Education Reform and Development in 1993, the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China and the Outline of Long-term Goals for 2010, etc.; For the management and operation of preschool education, see the Kindergarten Work Regulations (Trial Implementation) in 1989, the Regulations on the Administration of Kindergartens in 1989, and the Methods for the Management of Health Care in Nurseries and Kindergartens in 1994; For the relevant industry standards for preschool education, see the Standards for the Establishment of Full-time and Boarding Kindergartens (for Trial Implementation) in 1987, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection, the State Education Commission, the Guidelines for the Construction of Nurseries and Kindergartens in

1987, and the Catalogue of Kindergarten Play Aids in 1992; The preschool education system and career development are included in the Notice of the State Education Commission on Several Issues Concerning the Running of Schools by Social Forces in 1988, the Interim Provisions on the Management of Teaching and Running Schools by Social Forces in 1988, and the Interim Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Schools in 1995; For teacher policy, see Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China in 1993, National Kindergarten Principal Qualifications, Duties and Job Requirements (Trial Implementation) in 1996, etc.; For family education, see the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Family Education Work.

The preschool education policy in the mid-1990s covered almost all aspects of preschool education, and there were specific and quantitative provisions for relevant industry standards, which not only provided systematic policy support for regulating and leading the development of preschool education, but also provided a basis for the scientific management of preschool education.

In addition to being systematic and scientific, preschool education policies were also developing in the direction of humanization, mainly in government documents on children and teachers.

In 1991, the Chinese Government committed itself to protecting the rights of the child by signing two international conventions, the United Nations World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action for the Implementation of the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the Nineties. The Law on the Protection of Minors was enacted in 1991 and the Outline of the Development Plan for Chinese Children was promulgated in 1992, which stipulated the family, school, social and judicial protection of minors.

In terms of educational principles, it was emphasized that education should respect children and follow the laws of their physical and mental development. For example, the Kindergarten Work Regulations in 1996 stipulated: "The working principles of kindergarten education are: follow the laws of children's physical and mental development, conform to the age characteristics of young children, pay attention to individual differences, teach according to people, and guide the healthy development of children's personality" (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999).

During this period, the government formulated the Teacher Law of the People's Republic of China in 1993, which not only clarified the rights, treatment and rewards of teachers, effectively protected the legitimate rights and interests of teachers, but also stipulated the responsibilities, obligations and working principles of teachers, standardized the system of teacher qualifications, training and training, and assessment, and provided a policy guarantee for teachers' professional growth.

2.3 From Mid-1990s to early 2000s: Preschool education policies fluctuated

During the Ninth Five-Year Plan from 1996 to 2000, in order to adapt to the transformation of economic development and the reform of the social system, the preschool education policy was adjusted in terms of school running channels and funding. In 1995, the "Several Opinions of the State Education Commission" put forward: "Deepen reform, actively and steadily promote the gradual socialization of early childhood education" (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999). In 1997, the "Opinions on the Implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Development Goals of the National Early Childhood Education Undertaking" further pointed out: "With the deepening of the reform of the economic system, we should actively and steadily carry out the reform of the kindergarten running system, further clarify the responsibilities of governments at all levels, explore the mode of running kindergartens and internal management mechanisms that adapt to the socialist market economy, and gradually promote the socialization of early childhood education" (Ministry of Education, 1997).

Due to the lack of specific supporting policies, there is a lack of norms for the steps, methods, and management of promoting the socialization of kindergarten education; Also due to the misreading of "socialization" in the process of policy implementation, that is, equating "socialization" with "marketization" and "privatization", some areas weaken or even shirk the government's responsibility for developing preschool education, blindly pushing preschool education to the market, resulting in the suspension and resale of a large number of kindergartens, and a significant reduction in preschool education institutions. After the "privatization" of some kindergartens, for the purpose of profit, the implementation of enterprise management of kindergartens, there has been a phenomenon of ignoring the quality of education and the law of education in order to meet the needs of the market and seek economic benefits (Pang & Hong, 2012).

In terms of funding, the Kindergarten Work Regulations in 1996 stipulated: "The funds for kindergartens shall be raised by the organizers in accordance with the law, so as to ensure that there are necessary funds for running kindergartens and stable sources of funds" (China Preschool Education Research Association, 1999). From 1996 to 2000, the total amount of preschool education in China slowly increased with the extensive participation of social forces, while at the same time, the government's financial investment in preschool education continued to decrease, and the total

amount of financial investment continued to decline (Pang & Hong, 2012).

2.4 Since the 21st century: The preschool education policy has developed steadily

Since the 21st century, the state has put the development of preschool education in a more important position, affirmed the government's responsibility to develop preschool education, adhered to the public welfare and inclusiveness of preschool education, advocated "child-oriented" education, attached importance to educational fairness, standardized private education, vigorously developed rural preschool education, and promoted the process of legalization of preschool education.

First, attaching importance to preschool education and putting the development of preschool education in a more important position. Kindergarten education is an important part of basic education and the foundation stage of school education and lifelong education in China. The development of early childhood education is of great significance to promoting the comprehensive and healthy development of children's physical and mental health, popularizing compulsory education, improving the overall quality of the people, and achieving the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way (Ministry of Education, 2001). "Governments at all levels should fully understand the importance and urgency of developing preschool education, take the vigorous development of preschool education as a breakthrough in the implementation of the outline of education planning, as an important task to promote the scientific development of education, and as a major people's livelihood project to build a socialist harmonious society, and include it in the important agenda of government work, and earnestly grasp it" (China State Council, 2010b).

Second, the return of government responsibilities. In terms of the kindergarten system, "adhere to the public welfare and inclusiveness of preschool education" (China State Council, 2010a), "Adjust the structure of kindergartens, take the development of inclusive preschool education as a key task, and focus on building a kindergarten system with inclusive resources as the main body in combination with local realities" (China State Council, 2018a). The development of private kindergartens has been standardized, "actively support private parks to provide inclusive services, regulate the development of for-profit private parks, and meet the different selective needs of parents" (China State Council, 2018). In terms of management, "adhere to the implementation of the early childhood education management system of local responsibility, hierarchical management and division of labor by relevant departments" (Ministry of Education, 2003). The supervision system has been improving, including the implementation of regulatory responsibilities, strengthen source supervision, improve process supervision, strengthen safety supervision, and strictly supervise according to law (China State Council, 2018). In terms of financial investment, "we must actively take measures to increase investment in early childhood education and increase year by year" (Ministry of Education, 2003). Governments at all levels should include preschool education funds in their financial budgets. New education funding should be tilted towards preschool education. Financial preschool education funds should account for a reasonable proportion of financial education funds at the same level, and there should be a significant increase in the next three years (China State Council, 2010a). In the development of preschool education, the governments at all levels have formulated corresponding preschool education development goals in various periods and included them in the overall social development plan. The "Several Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on the Deepening Reform and Standardized Development of Preschool Education" (2018) proposes that by 2020, the gross enrollment rate of kindergartens in the first three years of primary school in the country will reach 85%, and the coverage rate of inclusive kindergartens (the proportion of children in public parks and inclusive private parks) will reach 80% (China State Council, 2018).

Third, the basic value position of the preschool education policy is "child-oriented". The preschool education policy stipulates that education should follow the laws and characteristics of children's physical and mental development, should respect children's personality and rights, should develop children's personality, respect individual differences in children's development, should meet children's interests and needs, let children live a happy and meaningful childhood, and resolutely oppose the "primary schooling" of kindergartens.

Fourth, attaching importance to the issue of educational equity and take the promotion of equity as the basic education policy of the country (China State Council, 2010b). The government vigorously develops rural preschool education, striving to increase the popularity of rural preschool education. Efforts are made to ensure that left-behind children are enrolled in kindergartens. The government adopts various forms to expand rural preschool education resources and support the development of preschool education in poor areas" (China State Council, 2010a).

Fifth, accelerating the process of legalization of preschool education. The Several Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on the Deepening Reform and Standardized Development of Preschool Education (2018) called for the study and formulation of a preschool education law and the acceleration of preschool education legislation (China State Council, 2018).

3. The historical institutionalism interpretation of the policy changes in preschool education

In the view of historical institutionalism, history, although it contains some accidental events, is by no means a mess of chaotic facts. It can be seen that the changes in preschool education policies have their regularity.

3.1 The historical process of preschool education policy change: path dependence, gradual reform and institutional rupture

Historical institutionalism holds that the actual system manifests itself in two states—institutional survival and institutional rupture. The process of institutional change includes the normal period of institutional existence and the “key node period” of institutional rupture (Wang, 2017).

In the normal period, institutional change follows the law of “path dependence”, and a certain balance is maintained between the internal factors of the system and the system and the environment. The so-called path dependence is the borrowing and development of the concept of “path dependence” in economics by historical institutionalism, which means that the events of the previous stage may have a certain influence and restrictive effect on the events of the later stage (He, 2002). Path dependence emphasizes the direction, content, and mode of the current system, and is affected by the dependence of an important system, structure, social force, major event, or other relationship in the course of history (Liu, 2010).

In the “critical period”, institutional change manifests itself as a rupture with the previous system. The so-called key node is a special point in time in the historical process, at which a major event occurs and has an important impact on subsequent historical development. During the critical juncture period, the conflict and game of various forces led to the birth of a new system.

Since the reform and opening up, the clue to the change of China’s preschool education policy is: from the beginning of reform and opening up to the mid-1980s, it was a period of institutional rupture and the construction of a new system; The mid-1980s to the mid-1990s were the normal period of institutional survival of preschool education policies, during which preschool education policies followed the law of path dependence and revised and adjusted them steadily, moderately and gradually on the basis of institutional existence; From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, preschool education policy experienced a process of fracture and equilibrium; Since the 21st century, preschool education policy has re-entered the normal period of institutional existence.

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee was successfully held, which was a “key node” in the policy change of preschool education, which announced the end of the chaotic and disorderly state of the past decade and called for the introduction of a new system of preschool education. The construction of the preschool education policy system is a process of institutional rupture and rebalancing compared with the “ten-year catastrophe”, and at the same time, it shows the characteristics of “path dependence” for the preschool education policy from the founding of the People’s Republic of China to the cultural revolution. This is because at the beginning of the reform and opening up, it was a top priority to restore and put preschool education on the right track, and the formulation of a complete set of new preschool education policies required the preparation of professional theories and the investment of manpower, material resources and time, which was difficult in the situation of waste to be revitalized at that time. Secondly, after the founding of New China and before the Cultural Revolution, China’s childcare cause has made great achievements, accumulating valuable experience in running kindergartens, management, teaching and scientific research, teacher training, etc., and making significant contributions to cultivating a new generation of Chinese, liberating women’s labor force, and promoting production. Practice has proved that the preschool education policy in the seventeenth year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China has effectively promoted, guided and guaranteed the development of preschool education. Finally, although preschool education policies were undermined and suspended during the Cultural Revolution, the emergence and change of institutions was a historical process, and policy choices in the previous stage often affected policy formulation in the latter stage. The preschool education policy at the beginning of reform and opening up was based on the experience of running preschool education since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, based on the preschool education policy before the Cultural Revolution, and in terms of the purpose of running the kindergarten, work tasks, guiding principles, kindergarten curriculum, teacher training, etc., or resumed or revised and adjusted, showing the “path dependence” on the preschool education policy in the seventeenth year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

“Path dependence” does not mean that it remains static, and the preschool education policy from the early days of reform and opening up to the mid-1990s has been steadily and moderately revised and adjusted on the basis of maintaining the existence of the system, that is, gradually changing. In the process of gradual change of the system, the role of certain factors and forces on the system is gradual, continuous, and cumulative, and these factors and forces accumu-

late to a certain extent, and when the threshold critical point is reached, the balance between the old system and the external environment is broken, and under the joint action of internal and external forces, the system produces major and fierce changes, that is, the “threshold effect”.

From the mid-1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the rupture of preschool education policy was the result of the accumulation of forces to promote institutional change to the “threshold”: on the one hand, since the founding of the Country, China has faced the dilemma of lack of funds for “poor countries to run large education”, and since the reform and opening up, despite the rapid growth of social wealth, the government’s investment in preschool education is still short; on the other hand, the problems in the park-running system have become increasingly prominent. When these problems accumulate to the threshold, the key nodes of institutional change appear, in order to cope with the problems that have arisen in the reform, opening up and modernization construction, further deepen reform, and promote economic development, the “Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China and the Outline of Long-term Goals for 2010” was promulgated. In line with the country’s general policies, in the context of the reform of the kindergarten system triggered by the economic system reform, the policy of “socialization of early childhood education” was introduced.

The “socialization of early childhood education” not only did not solve the problems accumulated by the development of preschool education in the process of reform, opening up and institutional transformation, but blindly pushed kindergartens to the market, resulting in problems such as “difficult to enter kindergartens” and “expensive to enter kindergartens”. When “difficult to enter kindergartens” and “expensive to enter kindergartens” developed into people’s livelihood issues related to people’s living and working in peace and contentment, the “threshold effect” of institutional change played a role again, so the government continued to introduce new policies for preschool education to solve the problems caused by the blind “socialization of early childhood education”.

The rupture of preschool education policy from the mid-1990s to the early 21st century led to twists and turns in the development of preschool education. Profound lessons have prompted the government to realize that preschool education should be public welfare and inclusive, and the development of preschool education is an unshirkable responsibility of the government. Since the 21st century, the government has issued a number of preschool education policies, once again clarifying the nature of preschool education, establishing the development direction of preschool education for public welfare and inclusiveness, and establishing a new pattern of common development between public and private enterprises. Preschool education ushered in a new era of development.

3.2 Key factors in the policy change of preschool education: structure, concept and interests

Historical institutionalism holds that the key variables of institutional change are structure, perception, and interests. In the view of historical institutionalism, “structure” can refer to both the power structure and relationship between countries in a macroscopic way and the power relationship between individuals in a microscopic way (Hu, 2012). Historical institutionalism scholars tend to equate “structure” with “institution”. Because of its emphasis on the important role of institutions or structures, historical institutionalism is sometimes referred to as structural politics (He, 2002). “Analyzing the interrelationships between variables in terms of the structural interaction between institutions, interests, and ideas is the essence of the historical institutionalism analytical framework (He, 2004). Historical institutionalism uses “institution” in a structural sense, emphasizing the structural relationships between the variables that affect political consequences (He, 2004).

Examining the preschool education policy since the reform and opening up, it can be found that the system, concepts and interests and the interaction between the three are the key factors in the change of preschool education policy.

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China established the ideological line of emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts; Established that the work center of the Party and the state is socialist modernization; It is believed that the realization of the four modernizations requires a substantial increase in the productive forces, a change in the relations of production and the superstructure that are incompatible with the development of the productive forces, and a change in all modes of management, activity and thinking that are incompatible (He, 1999). Significant productivity gains require education to produce qualified workers. In the process of socialist modernization, education has always been placed in the position of priority development. At the same time, preschool education policy, as the superstructure, must adapt to the development of productive forces. Therefore, the construction of a preschool education policy system and the development of preschool education are the inevitable requirements for realizing new interests in the new political and economic system background after “rectifying chaos”, that is, building socialist modernization, cultivating the talents needed in the 21st century, and liberating women’s labor force.

From the beginning of reform and opening up to the mid-1990s, the preschool education policy has changed steadily, continuously improved and developed. By the Ninth Five-Year Plan period, due to major changes in systems, concepts

and interests, preschool education policies also fluctuated.

In terms of system, the Ninth Five-Year Plan plans the guidelines and development goals for national economic and social development. Within the institutional framework of the Ninth Five-Year Plan and guided by the overall goal of initially establishing a socialist market economic system with economic construction as the center, the “Opinions on the Implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Plan Development Goals for the National Early Childhood Education Undertaking” proposes to actively and steadily carry out the reform of the kindergarten running system, explore the mode of running kindergartens and internal management mechanisms that adapt to the socialist market economy, and gradually promote the socialization of early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 1997).

The system affects the concept, and the concept reacts to the system and promotes the reform of the system. In the process of reform and opening up, some new concepts have produced and affected institutional changes - the relevant concepts and ideas of the market economy have penetrated into all walks of life, causing changes in people’s concepts, such as the concept of interests, money, competition, efficiency, etc. There are both positive and negative elements in these new ideas. These negative elements have led to some misconceptions in the field of preschool education, for example, blindly introducing kindergartens to the market as enterprises; Another example is to treat kindergartens as factories, children as products, and teachers as producers, starting from meeting the needs of buyers and running education for profit; Another example is the complete application of the management methods and development models of enterprises to operate kindergartens; Wait a minute.

In terms of interests, preschool education is a public undertaking that requires long-term financial investment, and for a long time, China has faced difficulties with insufficient financial resources. During the Ninth Five-Year Plan period, in order to revitalize finance and improve its functions, China implemented a moderately tight fiscal policy. Under the condition of a decrease in total financial expenditure, whether it is the proportion of government investment in the total preschool education expenditure, the amount of preschool education expenditure in the government budget, or the proportion of preschool education expenditure in the financial budget to the budgeted education expenditure, there is a sharp downward trend, and the central government’s financial investment in preschool education is obviously reduced and the intensity is obviously insufficient (Pang & Hong, 2012).

Under the influence of systems and concepts, in the game with various interests, preschool education policies have changed - the government’s financial investment in preschool education has been sharply reduced, while vigorously advocating the “socialization of early childhood education”. This is not only due to the government’s lack of understanding of the public welfare attributes of preschool education, but also to some extent, the government’s decision to weigh various interests in the situation of insufficient financial resources and the urgent need for investment in important aspects related to the national economy and people’s livelihood, such as national defense, diplomacy, public safety, agriculture and forestry, transportation, grain reserves, and medical and health care. Immediately after the “socialization of early childhood education”, a large number of kindergartens have been resold and suspended, the number of kindergartens and children in kindergartens has decreased sharply, and problems such as “expensive to enter kindergartens” and “difficulty in entering kindergartens” have become increasingly prominent, and then have become people’s livelihood issues closely related to people’s lives.

The issue of people’s livelihood is the most concerned, most direct and most realistic interest issue of the people, and it is also an important issue that the government must focus on solving. Due to the changes in the relationship of interests, and also because the government realizes that the cause of preschool education is not only an important livelihood issue related to individual development, the liberation of women’s labor force, and the harmony and happiness of the family, but also a major social issue related to improving the quality of the people and enhancing the competitiveness of the country.

Since the 21st century, the government’s responsibilities have gradually returned, and the preschool education policy has focused on the development of inclusive preschool education, and strives to “provide children with more abundant, more inclusive and better quality preschool education” (China State Council, 2018).

Systems, concepts and interests are the key factors in the policy change of preschool education, and the institutional background of preschool education policy is the mother of its birth; Ideas are the ideological basis for policymaking, “when an idea is accepted and given a structural form, the system is born” (Peters, 2019); “Interests are expressed through institutions, and whether they are achieved or not, interest organizations and political structures put their needs and problems on the political agenda” (Immergut & Anderson, 2008). Under the combined action of systems, concepts and interests, preschool education policies have undergone historical changes.

4. The historical enlightenment of preschool education policy changes

Historical institutionalism centers on institutions and explains the essence of political life through the study of institu-

tional change; at the same time, taking history as the dimension, it examines the occurrence and change process of the system, promotes the understanding of the system, and uses historical logic to overcome the limitation of human decision-making rationality (Zhuang, 2008). Examining the changes in preschool education policies since the reform and opening up from the perspective of historical institutionalism can bring some inspiration to the formulation of preschool education policies.

4.1 “Reform on the road, concept first”

Ideas are a key variable in the framework of historical institutionalism’s research on institutional change. Historical institutionalism holds that ideas influence the direction, pattern, and outcome of institutional choices. Preschool education policy is the top-level design of the party and the government for the development of preschool education. Among the factors influencing preschool education policy—concepts including the understanding of the nature, role, value, importance, education and teaching laws, children’s concepts and other aspects of preschool education—have an important impact on the formulation of preschool education policies. “Ideas cannot be separated from the background of the human system, and ideas as political forces should always be considered according to the positioning of the system, just as the system always thinks from its inner thoughts” (Smith, 1995). On the one hand, ideas influence the formation of institutions; On the other hand, the established system affects the concept of the person who is in it, and thus the practical action of the person. Although perception is a key variable in policy change in preschool education, its importance is often unrecognized.

For example, at the beginning of reform and opening up, China regarded the development of preschool education as a strategic task of the party and the state. Judging from the policy texts, China has always attached importance to the development of education, and in 1995 it even determined the strategy of “rejuvenating the country through science and education.” There is a view that whether the strategic position of education is implemented or not, the importance of education in actual social life is not reflected in documents and slogans, but in the country’s education investment (Yang, 2006). There is some truth to this. The concept is embodied in action, the development of education requires financial investment, whether to really attach importance to education, from the government’s financial investment in education can be seen. The government’s investment in education has been insufficient for many years, and it has decreased year by year during the Ninth Five-Year Plan period, which precisely reflects that the understanding of the importance of education needs to be deepened or implemented. This also shows from one side that the concept that truly guides action is not necessarily a publicly proclaimed concept, and even if it is recognized, it may not be practiced. The fact that the idea has not been practiced shows to some extent that the idea has not yet been truly accepted.

Since “the social forces of any idea must be adopted by these ideas by a strong political organization, and integrated with other ideological methods, and can only be produced and enhanced when they are more widely spread to the social organism” (Liu, 2010), Therefore, “reform is on the road, ideas come first”, and to promote the development and improvement of preschool education policies, it is necessary to pay the necessary attention to a key variable affecting institutional change: to pay attention to the study of the conceptual level, to the promotion and dissemination of new ideas, Emphasis on the cultural “context” of preschool education policy formulation, etc.

4.2 Preschool education policies should use a gradual change model

From the beginning of reform and opening up to the mid-1990s, it was the institutional existence of preschool education policies, and preschool education policies were undergoing gradual changes. During the Ninth Five-Year Plan period, the preschool education policy experienced a system rupture, and since the 21st century, the preschool education policy has restored balance from the rupture and continued to undergo gradual changes.

Unlike revolutionary changes, which completely subvert and break the past, gradual changes advocate seeking change in stability, constantly reforming the ills of the old system to cope with new problems, and accumulating less into more through the accumulation of gradual quantities, so that the system can be continuously optimized in a smooth transition. In a relatively stable internal environment and a relatively peaceful international environment, the superiority of the progressive model is highlighted: “small, slow, and gradual changes, through accumulation, often lead to ‘real’ changes” (Kickert & Van Der Meer, 2011), Gradual changes gradually deal with complex issues related to the overall situation, complex content, and many benefits, and reduce the cost and risk of institutional reform failure; It tries to move forward steadily from easy to difficult in positive interaction, coordinate the interests of all parties, and make them reach consensus. Because of its soundness and low risk, incremental change is very suitable for countries in relatively peaceful situations that pursue harmony and stability to implement reforms and solve complex problems (Jia, 2016).

At the beginning of reform and opening up, China followed the preschool education policy from the founding of the

People's Republic of China to the cultural revolution, leading the rapid recovery of preschool education and on the right track. In the more than ten years after the reform and opening up, the preschool education policy has been continuously adjusted, revised, supplemented and developed, and by the mid-1990s, the preschool education policy has begun to take shape in a systematic and scientific nature, and has moved towards the direction of humanization and rule of law. At this stage, the preschool education policy has made remarkable achievements in the steady progress, which fully proves the superiority of the gradual change model. Since the 21st century, the government has focused on solving the problems caused by the rupture of the system, and on the other hand, it has formulated various measures to deepen the reform of the kindergarten system step by step, including placing the development of preschool education in a more important position, expanding educational resources in various forms, strengthening the construction of preschool teachers in various ways, increasing investment in preschool education through multiple channels, strengthening kindergarten access management, strengthening kindergarten safety supervision, standardizing kindergarten fee management, improving work mechanisms, and strengthening organizational leadership (China State Council, 2010).

In the current relatively peaceful situation, on the basis of maintaining social harmony and stability, the preschool education policy should adopt a gradual institutional change model, that is, on the existing basis, step by step to adjust, replace and improve the preschool education policy. Before the introduction of the policy, it is advisable to carry out a small-scale pilot and then gradually promote it to avoid the sudden rupture of the system and lead to fierce social contradictions and conflicts.

4.3 Viewing preschool education policies with complex thinking

In the view of historical institutionalism, institutions are not simple, arbitrary, and isolated existences, but arise in complex social systems and in the interaction of multiple factors. The system is not an independent object that has lost its historical relevance and social environment, but an object that contains different levels and types, and is intricately interacting, continuing in history, and actively interacting with the social environment. Historical institutionalism looks at institutions with complex thinking:

First, institutions are in a complex social context, and political structures, interests, concepts, and the interaction between the three affect the generation and change of institutions. Historical institutionalism focuses on understanding institutions in the context of institutional context, power structures, and cultural changes.

Second, once the system is formed and enters a certain pattern, it will form a "path dependence", and the possibility of going down the same path will increase. This means that the past, present and future of the system are not separated from each other, and understanding the current system and constructing a new system must consider the "path dependence" of the system, that is, after the formation of the system, there is a mechanism of self-reinforcement and self-learning, and the system produced in a specific background has a decisive role in the future development of the system (Zhuang, 2008).

Third, historical institutionalism attaches importance to the variables that affect the system, such as timing, persistence, contingency, unintended consequences, etc., and believes that the political process has contingency, the same variables do not necessarily cause the same results, the same results are not necessarily caused by the same variables, so it is necessary to understand the impact of the past on the present through the retrospective of the occurrence, choice, and change of past policies.

Historical institutionalism's ideas on the formation and change of institutions provide guidance for the formulation of preschool education policies.

First of all, the formulation of preschool education policy is a complex process, we should examine the history of the change of preschool education policy, should put the preschool education policy and the country's major policies, economic development level, interests and needs of all parties, educational resource allocation, ideology, ideology and culture and other influencing factors in the causal chain to investigate, analyze the interrelationship and role between various complex factors and preschool education policy.

Secondly, we should pay attention to the threshold effect of contradictions between the inside and outside of the preschool education policy, promote the steady development of the system, and avoid destructive ruptures in the system. For example, pay attention to the contradictions and changes caused by educational inequities, and systematically formulate policies to promote educational equity; focus on key events that may lead to institutional change, and seize the opportunity to promote policy development and progress.

Finally, preschool education policy, as an independent variable, affects people's concepts, behavior patterns, lifestyles, etc. On the one hand, the impact of the current policy on people should be considered, and these effects may become the resistance of the new policy - the implementation of the new policy requires people to change the old concepts, old behaviors, etc., and changing the old system means paying extra efforts, so the formulation and introduction of new policies cannot ignore the lasting impact of the old system on people. On the other hand, we should evaluate and judge

the various results and advantages and disadvantages of the new policy, and pay attention to the changes that may be caused by the preschool education policy as an independent variable. Historical institutionalism examines the system as a dependent variable and an independent variable: as a dependent variable, historical institutionalism deeply studies the interest relationship between political structures, concepts and power subjects in the process of institutional formation and change, analyzes the influence of various forces on the system, and explains the causes and processes of system emergence and change under objective conditions; as an independent variable, historical institutionalism studies the influence of the system on political behavior, organizational relations, policy methods, policy content, and social reality within the institutional structure (Liu, 2010). The use of historical institutionalism methods to analyze the changes in preschool education policies is conducive to a deeper understanding of preschool education policies, summarizing historical experiences and lessons, and thus promoting the further improvement of preschool education policies.

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