



The Changes and Enlightenment of East Asian Preschool Education Policy

Jinghan Liu(✉)

School of Pre-education, Capital Normal University, Beijing 100017, China
1193103015@cnu.edu.cn

Abstract. In recent years, East Asia has paid more attention to the low fertility rate and the aging of the social demographic structure, which has issued several policies and regulations to improve this trend. However, the effect of a series of pro-birth policies led by the three-child policy is not significant. This review investigates the changing trends of preschool education policies in countries or regions dominated by mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. Also, it analyzes the number of preschool children, kindergartens, preschool teachers, and government investment in the past decade. After reviewing previous research, it is found that the governments of various countries and regions in East Asia support the development of preschool education by issuing policies and increasing fund investment. Among them, all countries and regions except Japan have an upward trend during the development of preschool education. The study summarizes the main policy measures of various countries in East Asia and provides suggestions for the development of preschool teachers in mainland China.

Keywords: East Asia · Preschool education · Policy and law

1 Introduction

With the rapid growth of the global economy, low birthrate and aging have become an inevitable development trend faced by developed countries and rapidly developing countries [1]. Meanwhile, a series of problems caused by them have also attracted extensive attention from the international community [1]. The declining birthrate and aging problems, led by Japan, are particularly evident in the comparison of many countries, which have become the object of discussion and attention of many scholars. For example, some scholars pointed out that in the past 40 years, Japan's fertility rate has continued to decline. Since 2011, the total population has started to grow negatively and continue [2]. There is also previous research about Japan's weak economic growth, closely related to its aging and declining birthrate [3]. As it is a social development phenomenon, the low birthrate problem has a relatively apparent development trend in East Asian regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and mainland China. People may be worried about the drawbacks it brings will restrict the country's development. The threat of a low birthrate to the population's social structure is reflected in breaking the original balance of the population structure [4]. At the same time, this trend is bound to threaten

the country's labor market due to fewer births, reducing the labor force and increased unemployment [5, 6].

To solve these existing problems, increasing the birth rate is one of the keys. The policy innovation of preschool education and the welfare security system provided will impact that cannot be ignored in increasing the birth rate [7, 8]. For East Asia, some studies argue that one of the most important reasons for the low fertility rate is the high cost of parenting [9]. As an education system for children aged from 3 to 6 years old, preschool education can reduce the burden of parenting and economic pressure to a certain extent with good social security and inclusive welfare policies, thereby ensuring a stable increase in the fertility rate from the material level [10]. Some scholars put forward that to improve the quality of the people, improving the quality of preschool education is the foundation, and vigorously developing preschool education can improve the quality of laborers, promote the development of productive forces, and also the socialist market economy [11]. Preschool children are in a critical period of brain development. During this period, good preschool education will have an important impact on their learning quality throughout their lives.

In view of this, we should analyze the development of early childhood education in East Asia, including related policies and its changing trends, to learn their lessons from them, and then to provide inspiration and reference for the development of early childhood education in mainland China.

2 Situation of Preschool Education Development in East Asian Countries and Regions

When reviewing the gains and losses of its experience, it is necessary to first clarify the development and changing trends of various countries and regions. From the current point of view, the development of preschool education in East Asia, dominated by South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, has been relatively stable in the past decade. From 2012 to 2020, the number of kindergartens and teachers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea showed a relatively obvious growth trend, and the number of kindergarten students maintained a relatively stable development. However, the development of preschool education in Japan is not optimistic as expected, with a sharp decline in the number of children and kindergartens mentioned above. Figure 1 was summarized by many previous studies [12–19].

In terms of the number of kindergartens, according to Fig. 1, since 2012, the number of kindergartens, and the number of students and teachers in Taiwan have shown a relatively obvious growth trend. Between 2011 and 2012, the number of kindergartens doubled, and the number of teachers and students tripled. Since then, it has maintained steady development on this basis. After the promulgation of this regulation, kindergartens and childcare centers were transformed into preschool education institutions, and the number of preschool education institutions has remained at around 6,400 since then. In contrast, the number of kindergartens in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong has been developing slowly, and the trend is not obvious. The number of kindergartens in mainland China has risen slightly, with an increase of 81,834 between 2014 and 2020.

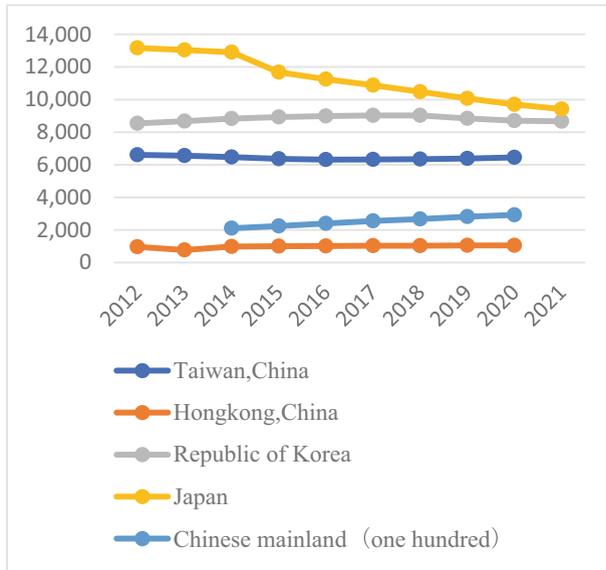


Fig. 1. Number of kindergartens [1–5]

Notably, the number of kindergartens in Japan has fallen sharply since 2014, from the number of 12,905 in Year 2014 to the number of 9,420 in Year 2021.

Figure 2 shows a graph of the “number of children in kindergarten” and “gross enrollment rate” in East Asia. As Fig. 2 shows, Japan has seen a more dramatic decline in the number of young children, with the number of students in school dropping from the number of 1,557,461 in the Year 2014 to the number of 1,009,008 in the Year 2021. The number of kindergartens in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea was relatively stable, among which the number of children in Taiwan showed a slight and steady upward trend, rising from an initial 459,653 to a final 583,406 in the nine years. Both Hong Kong and South Korea have shown a slight downward trend in recent years, fluctuating around 200,000. Hong Kong, China dropped from the number of 185,398 in the Year 2015 to 164,935 in the Year 2020. And there was a relatively large downward trend from the Year 2017 to 2018, with a drop of 6,745 people in the same year. South Korea also fell from 332,248 in 2015 to 245,979 in 2021. With the increase in the number of children in kindergarten, many countries and regions have also seen an increase in the gross admission rate. Among them, the gross admission rate in mainland China and Taiwan, China has increased most significantly. Although Hong Kong’s gross admission rate has shown a downward trend, from 115% in 2012 to 101% in 2019, its percentage is still above 100.

Figure 3 shows the situation of “number of teachers in the kindergarten” and “student-teacher ratio” in East Asia. As shown in the figure, except for Japan, the remaining four countries and regions have a steady upward trend in the number of teachers, especially in Taiwan China, where the number of teachers has risen steadily from 45,004 in 2012 to 56,771 in 2020. The number of teachers in South Korea also showed an overall upward

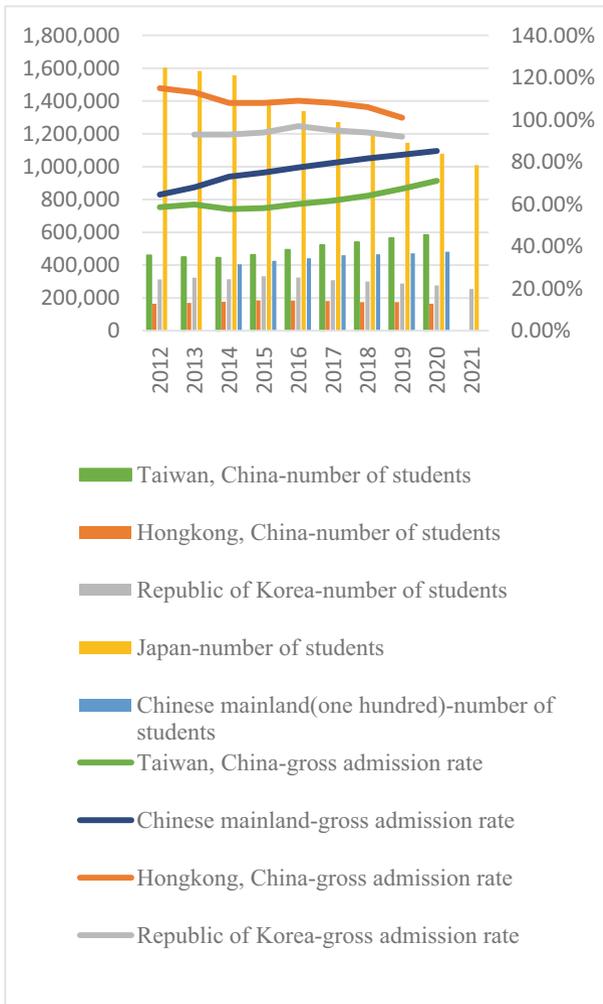


Fig. 2. “The Number of Kindergartens” and “Gross Enrollment Rate” in East Asia

trend, especially from 2012 to 2018. In 2018, the number of teachers showed a slow downward trend, from 54,892 in 2018 to 53,457 in 2021. Moreover, the development of the teacher population in South Korea and Taiwan is synchronized. The number of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong, China rose to a peak in 2018 (14,389), and fluctuated slightly from 2017 to 2020, stabilizing at around 14,200. The number of teachers in Japan has dropped significantly since 2013, from 11,111 in 2013 to 90,173 in 2021. In Japan, under the trend of both the number of children and teachers, the ratio of students to teachers has increased year by year since 2015. Until 2017, the number of children corresponding to each teacher reached 28. In contrast, the student-teacher ratios in South Korea and mainland China began to decline. The student-teacher ratio in South Korea stabilized at around 15 in 2015, and the ratio in mainland China dropped to 18 in

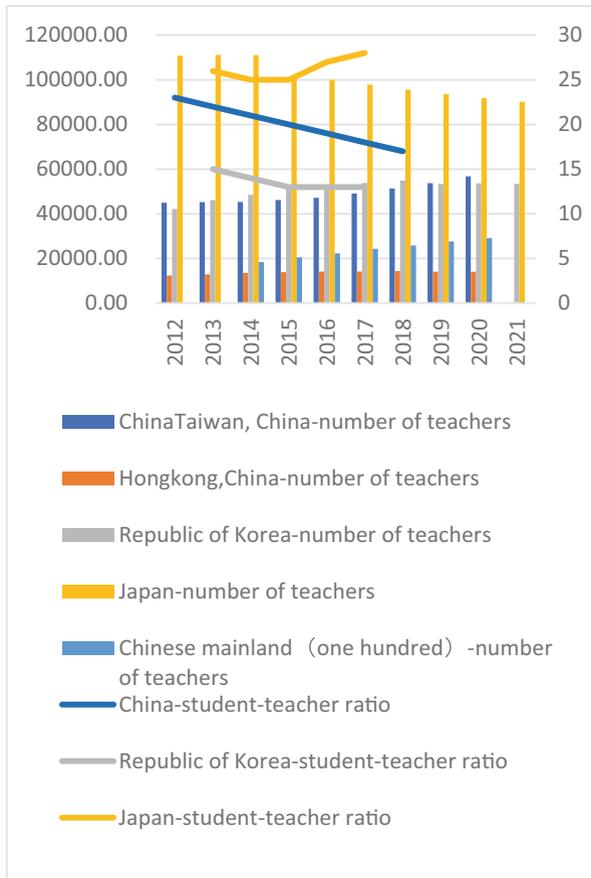


Fig. 3. The situation of “number of teachers in the kindergarten” and “student-teacher ratio” in East Asia

2018. However, the Japanese government’s education financial investment has shown a downward trend since 2017, with a decrease of 203.06 million US dollars between 2017 and 2018.

Figure 4 shows the government financial investment in East Asia. As shown in Fig. 4, in the past ten years, the financial allocation of mainland China has increased from 285 million in 2012 to 500 million in 2019, an increase of nearly doubled. At the same time, the entire East Asia region has increased government financial investment in the past five to ten years to provide better financial support for preschool education. Hong Kong’s financial investment and pre-school education expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have shown a steady upward trend, from 0.15% in 2015 to 0.25% in 2020. By 2020, the Hong Kong government’s financial investment in education has reached \$894.47 million. Although the Korean government’s expenditure on education has increased significantly, it shows a downward trend from the data on preschool education as a percentage of GDP, indicating that the Korean government’s

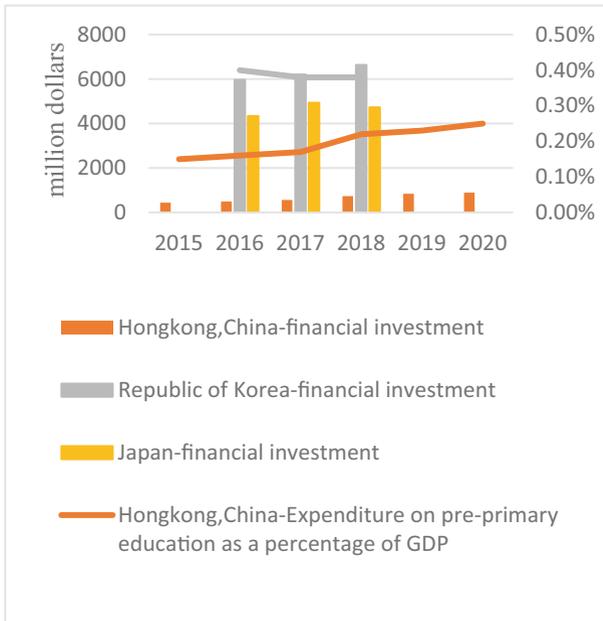


Fig. 4. Government financial investment

investment in preschool education has shown a slight downward trend, from 0.40% in 2016 fell to 0.38% in 2018. However, the Japanese government’s education financial investment has been on a downward trend since 2017, with a decrease of 203.06 million US dollars from 2017 to 2018.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that in the above indicators, except for the student-teacher ratio, Japan has experienced negative growth. The increase in the student-teacher ratio means that the number of teachers in Japan is declining faster than the number of children entering kindergarten and that a teacher will be dealing with more children. At the same time, Japan’s financial investment in the field of education has declined since 2017, indicating that the development of preschool education in Japan may be underfunded, making the development of preschool education in Japan more difficult. For the rest of the countries and regions except Japan, preschool education has shown a steady upward trend and has achieved certain progressive results, which are manifested in increased government funding, an increase in the number of enrolled children, an increase in the number of kindergartens, and a huge expansion of the teaching staff. The student-teacher ratio is reduced, that is, the quality of children’s education is improved.

3 Policies and Regulations on Preschool Education

The development of preschool education cannot be separated from the influence of policies and regulations. Due to the troubles brought by the declining birthrate and aging population in East Asia, various localities have issued policies and regulations

to improve the quality of preschool education, hoping to slow down the development trend of the problem, to reduce the pressure on parents to raise them and to reverse the concept of national fertility. As far as the policies of the past two decades are concerned, the policies of various countries are mainly carried out from three aspects: improving the publicity, fairness, and strengthening of compensatory mechanisms in preschool education.

3.1 Improve the Publicity of Preschool Education

When facing problems such as low fertility, all countries and regions have made policy adjustments to enhance the publicity of preschool education. In 2014, Taiwan proposed to provide tuition-free preschool education and care for 5-year-old children; in 2016, it proposed to increase public participation in preschool education and care. In 2020, it proposed to continue to increase the number of public kindergartens, and this policy will continue to be used so far [12]. In the article “Measures to Counter Fertility Decline (Early Education and Care of Children Aged 2 to 6)”, Taiwan, China proposes to expand public ECEC services (public preschool and non-profit preschool) in 2020, with the expected availability of public ECEC services in 2024. The total number will reach about 270,000. Similar measures were also mentioned in the “Early Childhood Education Law” promulgated by South Korea in 2004 and South Korea’s “National Child Care Quality Certification System,” which included South Korean preschool education into the framework of public education [20]. Mainland China also mentioned in the “14th Five-Year Plan” preschool education development and improvement action plan promulgated in 2021 that it is necessary to further improve the inclusive level of preschool education. By 2025, the national preschool gross enrollment rate will reach more than 90%. The coverage rate of kindergartens is over 85% [13]. The introduction of this series of policies has made great contributions to popularizing preschool education.

3.2 Improve the Equity of Preschool Education

In improving the fairness of preschool education, various countries and regions have also introduced relevant policies to support them. Taiwan’s Ministry of Education mentioned in the Ministry of Education’s policy goals released in 2017 that students should be encouraged to attend schools close to their homes to reduce educational imbalances [12]. At the same time, Japan’s “Child Welfare Law” also mentions that Japan’s child welfare facilities should be regulated, providing welfare services for disabled children, therapeutic parenting guidance, and child-raising support projects. In particular, it is essential to protect the basic rights of disadvantaged children and improve the fairness of preschool education [21]. In addition, Hong Kong has also published articles on improving the equity of preschool education. Since the 2017/18 school year, Hong Kong, China has implemented the “Kindergarten Education Plan” to provide affordable and high-quality pre-school education and improve the chances of students receiving different modes of pre-school education according to their needs [14]. At the same time, various countries and regions have proposed to effectively protect the rights of children from financially disadvantaged families to receive preschool education. Taking mainland China as an example, the Ministry of Education proposed that the preschool

education development funds should focus on the rural areas and underdeveloped areas in the central and western regions, optimize and improve the financial subsidy policy, and effectively ensure that children from families with financial difficulties receive inclusive preschool education [13].

3.3 Adopt a Subsidy Policy

At the same time, countries and regions have also adopted subsidy schemes as a compensatory mechanism to reduce the financial burden on parents. In 2015, Taiwan, China introduced the “Ordinary Child Allowance Program UCA”, in which all families with children under the age of three are eligible to receive a monthly UCA of 3,000 New Taiwan Dollars (NTD) [22]. Hong Kong, China also implemented the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme in the “Financial Committee Discussion Paper” released in December 2006, providing direct pre-primary education tuition subsidy to parents to cover the tuition fees of eligible kindergartens. In the article “New Milestones in Preschool Education” published by Hong Kong, China in August 2009, it was mentioned that in order to reduce the burden and subsidize parents, from 2007/08 preschool, school vouchers have been provided for parents to provide tuition assistance and support teachers’ professional development [14]. Japan has also implemented the Child Allowance Policy (CAP) since 2010, expanding the scope and amount of the allowance, and children 15 years old or younger are eligible to receive the allowance, which is 13,000 yen (about \$US 120 yen) per month [23]. Japan’s “Child Welfare Law” revised in 2008 also mentioned that there must be financial support to support the implementation of various child welfare facilities and undertakings [21]. In addition, South Korea promulgated the “Infant and Child Care Law” in 1991 and the “ECE Law” implemented in 2004 also mentioned targeted financial support and assistance to low-income families and families with disabled children [24]. Mainland China also proposes to improve the mechanism of funding input and cost-sharing, formulate financial subsidies and charging policies, determine a reasonable level of family spending, and ease the economic pressure of raising children [13].

Through the combing of policies and regulations, it can be seen that Japan and South Korea have begun to use subsidy policies to reduce the cost of family parenting as early as the beginning of the 20th century, and from the perspective of increasing fairness and publicity, policies and regulations have been introduced to enhance the inclusiveness of kindergartens, take care of special family needs such as low income, and provide high-quality and low-cost preschool education and early childhood welfare. Hong Kong, China, followed this trend, and in 2007, it began implementing a voucher policy and increasing capital investment. Although China is relatively late in introducing preschool policies than Japan and South Korea, it has not yet promulgated legal provisions on preschool education to systematically govern existing problems. In the past decade, the government’s financial investment in the Chinese mainland has increased year by year, and the proportion of investment in semester education in the entire education system has gradually increased, indicating that the government has paid attention to the preschool education stage and has begun to improve the quality of preschool education from the aspects of finance and policy welfare.

4 Funding for Pre-school Education

The high cost of parenting has attracted the attention of governments in East Asian countries and regions as an important reason for affecting fertility rates. To address the high cost of parenting, reasonable cost-sharing is needed. The cost-sharing source was proposed by Johnstone in 1984 to refer that the cost of education should be shared by the government, students, parents and society [25]. Since the cost-sharing theory of the preschool field has not yet been clarified, this study refers to Johnstone's theory and analyzes it from three aspects: government, family and society.

At the government level, the preschool education allocations Chinese mainland can be divided into three categories according to different purposes: subsidized appropriations, incentive grants and subsidized grants, and the amount of grants increases year by year. In the past decade, China's total financial expenditure on education has risen from 2,314.7 billion yuan in 2012 to 4,004.6 billion yuan in 2019 [15, 26]. At the same time, the Chinese government has introduced a cost-sharing mechanism to dynamically adjust the charging standards of public kindergartens and the maximum fee limit for inclusive private kindergartens taking into account factors such as economic development, family affordability, and the cost of running kindergartens [13]. However, the total share of public education expenditure in Hong Kong and Chinese mainland China as a percentage of government expenditure showed a downward trend between 2012 and 2018, with the Chinese mainland falling from 14.4% in 2012 to 11.5% in 2018. Between 2017 and 2020, Hong Kong's total public expenditure on education as a percentage of government expenditure began to increase year by year, from 17.8% in 2017 to 20.6% in 2020. In 2018, public spending in preschool educational institutions accounted for 52.1% in Japan and 82.3% in South Korea [16].

Applying this area to pre-school education, the study found that while the government can provide some support, household spending still accounts for a large proportion of total spending. In Japan, for example, at the family level, parents have to afford the costs of preschool family learning, tutor fees, other extracurricular activities, etc. With the increase in family annual income, the average expenditure of children in public and private kindergartens has a clear upward trend. This is mainly due to the fact that the average pre-school expenditure of households with an annual income of 12 million yen or more is about three times that of households with an annual income of 4 million yen or less. From 2012 to 2017, the average annual expenditure on family education in Taiwan was stable at about NT\$45,600, a significant downward trend compared with the previous decade, in which the largest proportion of tuition and miscellaneous fees and tuition fees exceeded NT\$10,000 [25]. However, the average education burden rate of preschool students accounted for 10.7% in 2017 [27]. At the social level, China's social donations to education have also shown a year-on-year growth trend since 2014, from 7.97 billion yuan in 2014 to 10.14 billion yuan in 2019. The vigorous investment of funds is also a manifestation of the government's attention to education [15].

It can be seen that although the government and society can give families some support to alleviate economic pressure, and the government's financial allocations are increasing year by year, most of the high cost of family parenting still needs to be borne by parents, and the phenomenon of increasing preschool education costs for young children increases as family incomes. Therefore, in order to solve the high cost of education for

families, in addition to increasing the government's funding, it is also necessary to solve the parenting pressure of parents and achieve educational fairness and equality. Starting with the main part of family education expenditure, the government can reduce the financial burden of family education by reducing tuition fees and extracurricular tutoring fees.

5 Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS)

The voucher scheme is very distinctive as a way of dealing with pre-school education funding in Hong Kong, China. In recent years, all sectors of Hong Kong society have mixed praise for the voucher scheme, believing that it involves a struggle between fairness and justice.

In order to achieve equality in education and enable the general public to have equal rights to education [28], the Hong Kong Government launched the "Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme" for each child aged 3–6 in Hong Kong, of which 10,000 are used to subsidize tuition fees and 3,000 to develop preschool teachers. At the same time, the government stipulated that the annual tuition fees of the half-day and full-time non-profit kindergartens participating in the program should not exceed 24,000 and 48,000 per person respectively [29]. This triggered a response at the time and effectively reduced parents' expenditure on the education of young children. At the same time, since part of the subsidy is used to enhance the professional ability of teachers, three years after the promulgation of the voucher scheme, 96.5% of preschool teachers have held or are studying for early childhood education certificates [30]. After a survey of parents of school-age children in Hong Kong, it was found that the public generally has a positive attitude towards school vouchers, believing that they can reduce family education expenditure, save extra money to provide children with extracurricular activities and quality education, also improve teachers and hardware equipment, etc. [31].

However, the promulgation of the voucher scheme has also brought about negative voices, some people believe that setting a maximum threshold for kindergartens to charge will limit the development of kindergartens, increasing the difficulty for kindergartens to increase teacher salaries and promote school development without operating on a smaller budget, and even the situation is the same as the salary of teachers with ten years of teaching experience and the salaries of new teachers [14, 32]. Moreover, as teachers need to obtain kindergarten education certificate courses, it invisibly increases the professional pressure on preschool teachers [32]. At the same time, as the vouchers are only subsidized for non-profit kindergartens, the choice of families is restricted to a certain extent, and there is an unfair phenomenon for young children who remain under the system.

Based on the voice of the masses and the problems caused by the PEVS in recent years, Hong Kong issued an implementation report in 2016 to implement the policy of free high-quality kindergartens from the 2017–2018 school year. It is estimated that the 80% of the half-day kindergartens will be open to the public free of charge, and the welfare will benefit 130,000 children. Notably, Children in qualified non-profit kindergartens in Hong Kong can enjoy this policy, but officials have not made a clear statement

on “qualified”. However, it can be determined that all qualified kindergartens are not-for-profit, so private independent kindergartens operated by commercial groups in Hong Kong will no longer be free [33].

6 Revelation

6.1 Accelerate Legislation on Preschool Education

As far as the current policies and regulations on preschool education in East Asia are concerned, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and other areas have laws related to preschool education, while the policy documents Chinese mainland more related to the teaching and teaching law levels, with the “Learning and Development Guidelines for Children aged 3–6,” “Kindergarten Education Guidelines” and “Kindergarten Work Regulations”, and there is no systematic legal provision to regulate the preschool education system. Therefore, even if the Ministry of Education promulgates relevant welfare policies and institutional guarantees, there are still omissions in the implementation and application of policies due to the lack of special laws. Mainland China can promulgate the “Draft Law on Preschool Education (Draft for Comment)” in time to clarify the basis for judgments on issues, improve the fairness and efficiency of preschool education, and provide legal guidance for the development of the preschool field.

6.2 Increase the Intensity of Government Input

As an educational stage with a high return on investment, the preschool stage is valued by various national and regional governments. At present, although the investment in preschool education in mainland China is increasing, the relevant welfare guarantees and subsidies are still small, and the education expenditure is still mainly based on families. Compared with Japan and other areas where welfare policies were introduced earlier, the Chinese mainland can introduce corresponding welfare policies as soon as possible to increase the coverage of financial subsidies for education. Chinese mainland can also learn from the relevant policies issued by various countries and regions, build public parks in poor areas, promote the quality of preschool education in economically underdeveloped areas, give priority to providing preschool education funding for students with family difficulties, enhance the publicity and inclusiveness of education, and thus reduce the burden on parents. In addition, the government can also increase financial investment in teacher groups, attract social talents into the ranks of teachers by increasing salaries, and optimize the quality of kindergarten teachers. At the same time, financial allocations can be increased to provide outstanding teachers with high-quality learning activities such as public visits and lectures, to provide a platform for the lifelong learning of preschool teachers and make material guarantees.

6.3 Increasing the Enrolment Rate and Further Reducing the Student-Teacher Ratio

According to the latest standards of the “Kindergarten Staffing Standards (Provisional)” promulgated by the Chinese mainland, the kindergarten student-teacher ratio should

be before 1:11 to 1:13, and the East Asian countries and regions in this study have exceeded this ratio, of which Japan is as high as 28. Although the student-teacher ratio in the Chinese mainland is declining, the student-teacher ratio in 2018 is still much higher than the standard level. With the introduction of policies in various countries and regions to establish inclusive kindergartens, the number of students enrolled in kindergartens has also begun to rise year by year. As the number of students entering the kindergarten increases, the decrease in the student-teacher ratio will be challenging. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that the growth rate of in-service teachers is faster than that of children in kindergartens, so as to achieve a decline in the proportion of students and teachers. The importance of the student-teacher ratio is that it reflects the learning atmosphere of students and the workload of teachers, ensuring that every young child can be seen and cared for in a high-quality educational environment. The government can increase investment in the construction of the teaching force while providing welfare policies for young children, attract the inflow of talents, and ensure that the student-teacher ratio is reduced on the basis of the increase in the enrollment rate.

6.4 Improve Teachers' Professional Quality

Teacher literacy determines the development level of preschool education, and good teachers will not only improve the quality of preschool education but also increase the enrollment rate to a certain extent and reduce the burden of parenting. In terms of improving the capacity of teachers, the Chinese mainland can draw on the advantages and disadvantages of existing policies in various countries and regions to develop methods suitable for the Chinese mainland. For example, the voucher system in Hong Kong, China, is too tough in improving teacher literacy, focusing only on results, and ignoring the individual ability and energy distribution of teachers, resulting in the problem of teacher fatigue and a decline in preschool degrees. Therefore, Chinese mainland can adopt a variety of training methods to improve teachers' professional capabilities, combined with regular assessments, and gradually improve teachers' abilities. In addition to professionalism, teachers' sense of belonging to the profession and enthusiasm for work is also one of the important components of their professional quality. The government can enhance teachers' sense of self-identification with the profession and enhance their professional beliefs by increasing their salaries and social status.

7 Conclusion

As the foundation of lifelong education, preschool education has a vital impact on personal development and improves the overall quality of the people, provides high-quality labor, and promotes social and economic development in the long run. This review summarizes the development trend and previous research on preschool education in East Asia, conducting a comparative study of preschool education policies and regulations in different countries and regions. It compares the development trend of preschool education horizontally and vertically.

The study found that to cope with aging and low birthrates, various countries and regions in East Asia have successively introduced policies, regulations, and compensation mechanisms for preschool since the end of the 20th century, aiming to improve the

fairness and publicity of preschool education. However, judging from the survey results, there are still some limitations in the policies and regulations of preschool education in East Asia, which Japan led.

Therefore, combined with the advantages and disadvantages of policies in East Asia and the situation and characteristics of Chinese mainland preschool education development, four enlightenments are drawn: 1) accelerate preschool education legislation; 2) increase government investment; 3) increase the enrollment rate and further reduce the student-teacher ratio; 4) improve the professional quality of teachers. The government is suggested to start from these aspects and continue to enhance the development of preschool education.

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