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Opportunities and Challenges for Kindergartens in the Context of Low Birth Rates

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Abstract: With the continuous decline in China's birth rate, the preschool education system is undergoing a structural shift from incremental growth to stock adjustment. This paper systematically analyzes the practical challenges and strategic transformation opportunities faced by kindergartens in the context of low fertility rates. The study indicates that the decline in the newborn population has directly triggered an enrollment crisis and a wave of kindergarten closures. This impact manifests with significant differentiation across public, private, inclusive, and non-inclusive kindergartens, thereby exacerbating the structural imbalance between supply and demand as well as deviations in spatial planning. However, the reduction in student numbers also presents a historic window of opportunity for preschool education to transition from scale-oriented growth to quality- and connotation-oriented development. By promoting the integration of nursery and kindergarten care to broaden service boundaries, implementing small-class teaching to improve childcare and education quality, and establishing support systems such as district-based governance, resource allocation can be optimized to promote the sustainable and high-quality development of preschool education. The findings offer actionable policy recommendations for educational administrators and stakeholders seeking to navigate the demographic transition while safeguarding equitable access to early childhood education.

Keywords: low birth rates; kindergartens; nursery-kindergarten integration; small-class teaching; preschool education

1. The Real-World Background of Low Birth Rates

In recent years, China has experienced a sustained decline in birth rates, driven by multifaceted socioeconomic transformations—including rising educational attainment among women, increased participation of women in the labor force, expanding urbanization, prolonged duration of higher education and career establishment, rising costs associated with housing, childcare, and education, as well as evolving intergenerational attitudes toward marriage and family formation. These developments have fundamentally reshaped demographic dynamics and family structures across urban and rural regions alike [1, 2]. As the foundational stage of formal education, preschool education is uniquely sensitive to shifts in cohort size, serving as an early indicator of demographic change within the national education system. The persistent downward trend in birth numbers reflects not temporary statistical variation but rather deep-seated structural transformation—characterized by delayed childbearing, smaller family size norms, and growing preference for quality over quantity in child-rearing practices. This demographic transition exerts cascading effects throughout the education sector: it influences institutional planning and infrastructure investment, necessitates recalibration of teacher recruitment and professional development strategies, prompts reevaluation of class-size standards and staffing ratios, challenges traditional assumptions about enrollment projections and geographic distribution of services, and invites pedagogical reflection on how early childhood curricula and support systems can adapt to increasingly diverse family configurations and developmental needs. Furthermore, declining birth

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cohorts intersect with regional disparities, migration patterns, and policy implementation timelines, requiring nuanced, evidence-informed responses at provincial and municipal levels to ensure equitable access and sustained quality in early childhood education provision.

2. The Direct Impact on Kindergartens

The dramatic shift in population structure represents not merely a macro-level demographic trend but also triggers profound and cascading effects across educational infrastructure, particularly within the preschool sector. Kindergartens—operating under enrollment-dependent financial models—face acute operational pressure as declining birth rates directly reduce the pool of eligible children. This demographic contraction generates systemic instability, manifesting as reduced tuition revenue, underutilized teaching staff, diminished facility utilization, and increased per-child administrative costs. The impact is highly heterogeneous: urban kindergartens may experience delayed effects due to migration inflows and higher parental demand for early education, whereas rural and suburban institutions confront immediate enrollment shortfalls, often compounded by aging infrastructure and limited access to qualified educators. Consequently, institutional viability diverges sharply along geographic, socioeconomic, and governance lines—publicly funded kindergartens may receive transitional policy support, while privately operated ones face intensified market competition and consolidation pressures. The resulting wave of closures reflects a structural recalibration rather than isolated failures; it signals an ongoing realignment of preschool provision to match evolving demographic realities. Strategic closure decisions prioritize optimizing spatial distribution, eliminating redundancies, and phasing out facilities that lack adequate safety standards, pedagogical capacity, or accessibility. Such adjustments aim to enhance overall service efficiency, improve quality assurance mechanisms, and ensure sustainable resource allocation across the early childhood education system [3, 4]. Furthermore, this transition necessitates proactive workforce planning, including retraining pathways for displaced educators and revised teacher-to-child ratio frameworks aligned with smaller cohort sizes [5–7]. Long-term resilience requires integrating demographic forecasting into regional education planning, strengthening inter-agency coordination between health, civil affairs, and education departments, and developing adaptive financing models that decouple sustainability from raw enrollment numbers alone.

2.1. Persistent Decline in Birth Rates Creates a Student Source Crisis for Kindergartens

Student enrollment constitutes the foundational operational determinant for kindergartens, directly influencing curriculum design and implementation, staffing configurations—including teacher-to-child ratios and professional development pathways—as well as long-term financial sustainability through tuition revenue, government subsidies, and auxiliary service income. As national birth rates persist at historically low levels, the resulting demographic contraction has progressively intensified enrollment pressure across the entire preschool education sector, affecting not only under-resourced or geographically peripheral institutions but also well-established, centrally located kindergartens with strong reputations and robust community ties [8, 9]. This systemic shift reflects a broader structural realignment: earlier decades witnessed sustained growth in preschool infrastructure, driven by favorable demographic conditions that supported the establishment of new kindergartens in both rapidly developing urban districts and revitalized rural communities. In contrast, contemporary trends indicate a fundamental transition in operational paradigms—from a phase characterized by capacity-building and service extension toward one defined by resource optimization, consolidation, and strategic adaptation. Consequently, inter-institutional dynamics have evolved significantly: competition is no longer oriented toward capturing newly emerging cohorts but instead centers on retaining families within shrinking age brackets, optimizing retention strategies, enhancing pedagogical differentiation, strengthening home-school partnerships, and improving service quality across health,

nutrition, developmental screening, and inclusive support frameworks. These developments underscore the necessity for evidence-informed policy responses, institutional agility, and coordinated regional planning to ensure equitable access, maintain educational quality standards, and uphold the developmental rights of all young children amid evolving demographic realities.

2.2. Differentiated Impacts Across Different Types of Kindergartens

The impact of declining birth rates on early childhood education institutions exhibits pronounced heterogeneity rather than uniformity, reflecting deep structural variations across institutional types. Kindergartens differ fundamentally in ownership model—whether public, collectively run, or privately operated—as well as in functional positioning, such as whether they serve as universal access providers, inclusive service units, or premium educational offerings [10, 11]. These distinctions directly shape their operational autonomy, financial sustainability mechanisms, staffing models, and responsiveness to demographic shifts. Consequently, the adaptive capacity and long-term viability of kindergartens under sustained low fertility conditions vary significantly, with implications for regional equity in preschool service provision, workforce stability, and the overall resilience of the early childhood education ecosystem.

Within the broader context of sector-wide enrollment contraction, public kindergartens generally exhibit greater operational continuity compared to other institutional forms. This relative stability stems primarily from consistent fiscal support through government budgetary allocations, formalized staffing frameworks governed by civil service or public institution regulations, and established salary and benefit structures that insulate personnel from short-term market volatility. Such institutional features enable public kindergartens to sustain core functions—including curriculum delivery, teacher professional development, and facility maintenance—even during periods of reduced student intake. However, this administrative durability does not necessarily equate to optimal resource utilization; some public kindergartens experience declining enrollment rates that result in underused classroom capacity, idle teaching positions, and inefficiencies in infrastructure deployment [12]. Moreover, rigid bureaucratic procedures and centralized decision-making processes can constrain timely pedagogical innovation, staffing reallocation, or service reconfiguration in response to localized demographic changes, thereby limiting dynamic adaptability despite formal stability.

Concurrently, increased public investment in early childhood education has altered the competitive landscape for private-sector providers. Private kindergartens—particularly those designated as inclusive institutions—operate within a dual constraint: diminishing demand due to fewer children entering the system, and rising fixed costs associated with compliance requirements, staff qualification standards, safety certifications, and facility upgrades. Although inclusive private kindergartens receive targeted fiscal subsidies, these supports are often accompanied by strict fee regulation policies that limit revenue flexibility, while operational expenditures continue to rise due to inflationary pressures on wages, utilities, learning materials, and insurance premiums. Non-inclusive private kindergartens, which typically cater to families seeking differentiated curricula or enhanced service quality, confront additional challenges stemming from shifting household consumption priorities. As family income distribution patterns evolve and discretionary spending on non-essential education services becomes more cautious, enrollment at higher-tier private institutions has softened, prompting strategic recalibrations in marketing approaches, program diversification, and partnership models with community organizations or cultural institutions to broaden appeal beyond traditional demographic segments [13, 14].

Further complicating the landscape, regional implementation of supportive policies sometimes reflects uneven application, including standardized subsidy formulas that fail to account for differential cost structures, geographic disparities in land and labor expenses, or variations in local demographic trajectories. In certain jurisdictions, funding mechanisms prioritize institutional type over actual service outcomes or community need,

inadvertently reinforcing systemic asymmetries. Historically, private kindergartens have absorbed substantial portions of preschool enrollment, especially in urban centers where public capacity lags behind population growth. Yet in the current demographic environment, policy emphasis has increasingly centered on expanding and strengthening the public provision network, potentially narrowing the scope for private entities to fulfill complementary roles in service diversification, innovation piloting, and localized responsiveness. Addressing this imbalance requires careful calibration—ensuring that public investment enhances universal access without undermining the capacity of diverse providers to contribute meaningfully to equitable, high-quality early childhood education outcomes across varied socioeconomic and geographic contexts.

3. Multidimensional Challenges Posed by Low Birth Rates

3.1. Declining Number of Eligible Young Children Leads to Kindergarten Closures

Following the sustained decline in birth rates and the onset of population growth stagnation, the preschool education sector has experienced profound structural adjustment. The shrinking cohort of children aged three to six—traditionally the core demographic for kindergarten enrollment—has significantly eroded the foundational demand base for early childhood institutions [15, 16]. This demographic contraction has manifested in widespread enrollment shortfalls across urban, suburban, and rural settings, with particularly acute impacts on smaller-scale or under-resourced facilities. Kindergartens characterized by limited infrastructure, insufficient pedagogical capacity, or geographic isolation have faced mounting operational pressures, as reduced student numbers directly diminish tuition-based revenue streams. Consequently, financial instability has escalated, triggering cascading challenges: diminished capacity to maintain qualified teaching staff, reduced investment in curriculum development and learning materials, and weakened institutional sustainability. In many cases, private-sector operators—facing fixed overheads including facility leasing expenses and personnel remuneration—have been unable to sustain operations amid declining enrollment, leading to voluntary withdrawal from the market. These closures reflect not isolated business failures but systemic realignment driven by long-term demographic trends. Furthermore, consolidation efforts—including mergers and administrative integration—have intensified, especially where local governments seek to optimize resource allocation and preserve educational access. Policy responses increasingly emphasize quality enhancement over quantity expansion, prioritizing teacher professional development, inclusive pedagogy, and adaptive governance frameworks to ensure resilience in a low-fertility context.

3.2. Imbalance between Kindergarten Supply and Demand

The current supply–demand relationship in preschool education has undergone a fundamental transformation, evolving from a historical challenge of quantitative insufficiency—characterized by widespread shortages of enrollment slots—to a more complex and persistent issue of structural imbalance. While national statistics indicate that the aggregate number of available kindergarten places now meets or even exceeds projected enrollment demand in many regions, significant disparities persist across geographic, socioeconomic, and institutional dimensions. Notably, certain urban districts and newly developed residential communities report underutilized facilities—sometimes referred to colloquially as 'empty kindergartens'—while simultaneously experiencing acute pressure on high-quality, publicly funded, and tuition-advantaged institutions. This paradox reflects deeper systemic tensions: the spatial distribution of preschool infrastructure often fails to keep pace with rapid urbanization patterns and population redistribution, particularly following large-scale housing development and inter-regional migration. Moreover, parental expectations have evolved substantially, with growing emphasis placed on pedagogical quality, teacher qualifications, curriculum richness, safety standards, and inclusive accessibility—not merely seat availability [17]. Consequently, demand is increasingly concentrated around kindergartens that

demonstrate excellence in educational practice, governance transparency, and community responsiveness. The underlying drivers of this misalignment include fragmented administrative oversight across education, planning, and civil affairs departments; insufficient mechanisms for dynamic forecasting of demographic shifts; and limited policy instruments to incentivize equitable resource deployment, especially in underserved neighborhoods and rural-urban fringe areas. Addressing this structural gap requires integrated, evidence-informed strategies that align infrastructure investment, staffing development, regulatory frameworks, and family support services within a cohesive early childhood ecosystem.

3.3. Deviations in Kindergarten Planning and Layout

Another profound impact of low birth rates on the education system is the structural imbalance in kindergarten planning and spatial distribution, which reflects broader demographic shifts and urban development patterns [3]. The coexistence of underutilized capacity and acute scarcity in urban kindergarten places has become a prominent contradiction in current education resource allocation. On the one hand, in the later stages of urbanization, newly constructed residential communities frequently include mandated supporting kindergartens; however, these facilities often experience chronic under-enrollment from inception due to declining cohort sizes and delayed household formation. This results in inefficient utilization of public investment, increased per-student operational costs, and challenges in sustaining qualified teaching staff. On the other hand, older urban districts—characterized by high population density, aging infrastructure, and constrained physical footprints—struggle to accommodate growing demand for accessible, high-quality early childhood education. Limited availability of suitable land parcels, regulatory barriers to building modifications, and complex stakeholder coordination further impede responsive adjustments. Moreover, population mobility—including inter-regional migration, intra-urban residential relocations, and shifting household composition—introduces pronounced temporal mismatches between projected enrollment models and actual demand. These dynamics generate significant time lags in education resource planning, undermining the responsiveness and equity of service delivery. Consequently, policy frameworks must integrate real-time demographic forecasting, flexible facility design standards, adaptive zoning mechanisms, and cross-departmental data sharing to align infrastructure development with evolving demographic realities. Strategic repurposing of underused spaces, modular construction approaches, and tiered service models may enhance scalability and resilience across diverse urban contexts.

4. Strategic Opportunities Brought by Low Birth Rates

Although the sustained decline in birth rates has introduced immediate challenges—including reduced enrollment volumes, underutilized infrastructure, staffing realignments, and financial recalibrations—for the preschool education sector, this demographic shift also creates a pivotal inflection point for systemic reconfiguration. From a macro-educational systems perspective, declining cohort sizes afford unprecedented latitude to prioritize depth over breadth: curricular refinement can replace curriculum proliferation; pedagogical innovation can supplant procedural standardization; and individualized developmental support can displace uniform delivery models. Rather than pursuing quantitative growth through increased capacity or widened access, institutions now possess the operational breathing room to invest intensively in teacher professional development, evidence-informed instructional design, inclusive learning environments, and robust formative assessment frameworks. This transition enables a deliberate recalibration of priorities—from metrics centered on student numbers and facility expansion toward indicators grounded in developmental outcomes, relational quality, equity of experience, and long-term learning trajectories. The reduction in aggregate student volume further facilitates smaller group configurations, enhanced adult-to-child ratios, more flexible scheduling, and deeper integration of play-

based, culturally responsive, and neurodevelopmentally attuned practices. Importantly, this structural recalibration does not imply diminished societal commitment to early childhood development; rather, it reflects a maturation of the field—shifting emphasis from foundational establishment to sophisticated implementation, from coverage to coherence, and from institutional scale to pedagogical substance. Such transformation requires coordinated policy scaffolding, sustained investment in human capital, and iterative evaluation mechanisms—but it is precisely the demographic constraint that renders such high-fidelity, learner-centered evolution both feasible and strategically imperative.

4.1. Promoting Integration of Nursery and Kindergarten Care to Expand Service Boundaries

First, systemic gaps in early childhood care for infants and toddlers aged 0–3 years require urgent attention. Historically, formal institutional support for this age group has remained underdeveloped across many regions, resulting in disproportionate reliance on familial caregiving and limited access to professionally staffed, regulated, and developmentally appropriate services. This structural deficit persists despite growing demographic pressures—including declining birth rates and shifting family structures—that heighten demand for reliable, high-quality early care. Concurrently, many early childhood education settings serving children aged 3–6 report underutilized capacity, particularly in urban and suburban areas where enrollment has declined. In response, a pragmatic and resource-conscious strategy has emerged: repurposing existing infrastructure—including vacant classrooms, underused educational equipment, and qualified early childhood educators—to extend service provision downward into the 0–3 age band. This approach enables inclusive private kindergartens to broaden their operational scope while maintaining continuity in staffing, governance, and pedagogical coherence. Second, integration must transcend logistical convenience or physical co-location; it necessitates the deliberate construction of a vertically aligned, developmentally sequenced continuum of care and learning. Such a continuum integrates health monitoring, nutritional support, developmental screening, responsive caregiving practices, play-based learning, and family engagement strategies across age bands—specifically spanning ages 2 through 6. Educational philosophies, curricular frameworks, assessment protocols, and quality assurance mechanisms must be harmonized to reflect shared developmental milestones and evidence-informed best practices. Institutional innovations—including coordinated medical–childcare–education partnerships, embedded public health outreach (e.g., immunization tracking, growth monitoring, oral health promotion), and structured home–institution collaboration models—can strengthen service coherence and accountability. Public kindergartens, with their established administrative frameworks, trained personnel, and regulatory oversight, are uniquely positioned to pilot, refine, and scale such integrated models in ways that prioritize equity, accessibility, and sustainability. The ultimate objective is not merely service expansion but the establishment of a unified, child-centered ecosystem wherein care and education function as interdependent, mutually reinforcing dimensions of early development.

4.2. Implementing Small-Class Teaching to Improve Childcare and Education Quality

From an educational and pedagogical perspective, the demographic shift toward lower birth rates has resulted in a sustained decline in preschool enrollment across multiple regions. This demographic trend—while presenting broader societal challenges—has inadvertently generated favorable structural conditions for the systemic implementation of small-class teaching in early childhood settings. Historically, large class sizes have been a persistent constraint on pedagogical effectiveness in preschool education, impeding teachers' capacity to deliver differentiated instruction, observe developmental nuances, and respond meaningfully to individual learning rhythms. Overcrowded classrooms often necessitated management-focused practices—such as rigid scheduling, whole-group directives, and standardized activity pacing—which inadvertently suppressed spontaneous expression, peer collaboration, and child-led

exploration. In contrast, the current reduction in child density enables a demonstrable improvement in the teacher–child ratio, thereby supporting more sustained, responsive, and emotionally attuned interactions. This recalibration facilitates a fundamental pedagogical transition: from transactional classroom management toward relational, interactive, and inquiry-based models grounded in constructivist principles. Teachers report increased opportunities to scaffold language development through open-ended dialogue, co-construct knowledge during play-based investigations, and tailor sensory-motor experiences to emerging competencies. Furthermore, smaller groups allow for richer documentation of developmental progress, more frequent formative assessment cycles, and greater flexibility in adapting curricular sequencing to children’s collective interests and evolving capacities. Such conditions not only enhance instructional quality but also strengthen socio-emotional scaffolding, promote inclusive participation, and foster a more equitable distribution of adult attention across diverse learners.

4.3. Improving Support Systems to Ensure the Sustainable Development of Inclusive Resources through Targeted Assistance

Although the recent wave of kindergarten closures appears, at first glance, to reflect a contraction in service provision, it simultaneously presents a pivotal inflection point for systemic recalibration within early childhood education governance. Rather than interpreting these transitions solely as indicators of decline, they can be reconceptualized as catalysts for strategic realignment—enabling more rational, equitable, and adaptive deployment of human, material, and institutional resources. Central to this reconfiguration is the dual-track policy trajectory encompassing both the conversion of privately operated kindergartens into publicly administered institutions and the concurrent expansion of high-quality programming across diverse settings. These parallel initiatives demand careful calibration: educational equity must be advanced without compromising pedagogical plurality, curricular responsiveness, or contextual adaptability—elements essential to sustaining ecological diversity within the preschool ecosystem. District-based governance emerges as a structurally robust framework for achieving such balance. Under this model, geographic proximity becomes the organizing principle for collaborative capacity-building: high-performing institutions are systematically paired with those facing resource constraints or developmental challenges, forming interlinked educational communities. Within these networks, resource sharing extends beyond physical infrastructure to include digital learning repositories, assessment toolkits, multilingual instructional materials, and inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Joint professional development is implemented through cyclical cycles of co-planning, classroom-based inquiry, peer observation, and reflective practice seminars—designed not only to elevate teaching competencies but also to foster collective ownership of quality improvement. Curriculum guidance is differentiated by developmental stage, linguistic background, and special educational needs, ensuring fidelity to foundational learning principles while honoring local cultural knowledge systems. Teaching and research activities are embedded in daily practice, transforming classrooms into sites of continuous evidence generation and iterative refinement. Administrative oversight shifts from compliance monitoring toward facilitative leadership, emphasizing data-informed decision-making, longitudinal progress tracking, and participatory evaluation mechanisms. This systemic architecture enhances operational efficiency, deepens cross-institutional accountability, and cultivates resilience against external shocks. Crucially, such support systems do not merely mitigate short-term viability pressures for private providers; they actively scaffold long-term institutional maturation—strengthening governance capacity, refining pedagogical coherence, and embedding sustainability metrics into strategic planning. The result is a more cohesive, responsive, and socially grounded early childhood education landscape, where economic viability and public mission reinforce rather than undermine one another.

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