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The Real Challenges and Management Support for Kindergarten Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy-Analysis from the perspective of generative curriculum design

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Abstract: The widespread adoption of the generative curriculum concept has fundamentally transformed the role of kindergarten teachers in curriculum development, shifting their professional agency from a theoretical discussion of instructional rights into a practical endeavor requiring active curriculum design and implementation. In contemporary early childhood education settings, teachers encounter a range of systemic obstacles when exercising their professional discretion in curriculum matters. These obstacles include weakened institutional empowerment, rigid administrative structures, gaps in professional competencies, and excessive bureaucratic workloads that divert attention from pedagogical innovation. Rather than attributing these difficulties to individual shortcomings, this study argues that they originate from the overarching architecture of educational management systems. Grounded in generative curriculum theory, this research critically examines the conceptual essence and pedagogical value of teacher-led curriculum development in early childhood contexts. It systematically identifies the key manifestations and root causes of the challenges teachers face, emphasizing that meaningful progress depends on a paradigm shift from control-oriented administration to support-oriented management. To address these issues, the study proposes a multi-level framework of management support strategies encompassing three dimensions: transforming institutional management philosophies, designing adaptable and flexible curriculum frameworks, and establishing comprehensive professional development systems for educators. These recommendations aim to offer actionable institutional insights for advancing curriculum innovation and enhancing the quality of preschool education.

Keywords: generative curriculum; teacher agency; curriculum development; management support; early childhood education

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1. Introduction of the Problem

In recent years, preschool education curriculum practices in China have undergone significant evolution, shifting from standardized teaching materials toward curricula tailored to individual kindergartens and from pre-established frameworks toward flexible, context-responsive approaches. Official guidance on evaluating the quality of kindergarten care and education underscores that teaching materials designed specifically for children—and curricula derived from foreign sources—must not be used, while affirming play as the primary learning activity and affirming children's central position in educational processes. This orientation calls for educators to base curriculum design on close observation and understanding of children's developmental characteristics, rather than relying on fixed textbooks.

A generative curriculum emerges organically from children's authentic interests and evolving needs, shaped continuously through responsive interactions between teachers and children—not through rigid adherence to preset plans [1, 2]. In practice, it refers to a dynamic process wherein teachers, during daily activities, sensitively recognize children's

emerging curiosities and developmental priorities, draw upon professional expertise and creativity to nurture each child's potential, and iteratively enrich learning experiences. This approach repositions the teacher from a passive executor of prescribed content to an active curriculum designer, with curriculum initiative—the capacity to thoughtfully select, adapt, and sequence learning content and methods according to the specific developmental context of one's class—serving as a foundational condition for effective implementation.

Yet a notable gap persists between policy expectations and classroom realities. Many kindergarten educators experience limited practical authority in curriculum development: although formal decision-making responsibilities are assigned, key operational decisions—including adjustments to learning sequences and allocation of instructional resources—often require layered administrative review, thereby constraining responsiveness. Educators also encounter several interrelated challenges: nominal decision-making authority without corresponding operational latitude; uneven access to locally relevant, readily usable resources for weekly planning; limited effectiveness of collaborative professional learning activities, which sometimes fail to address concrete pedagogical questions; and varying levels of proficiency among early-career staff in transforming local contexts and materials into meaningful learning opportunities [3]. When curriculum expectations emphasize ongoing responsiveness to children's interests and real-time instructional adaptation, while administrative procedures prioritize adherence to scheduled timelines and predefined activity structures, educators navigate complex tensions between professional judgment and procedural requirements.

Research highlights growing recognition of curriculum systems as vital enablers of high-quality implementation. Central to system improvement is the principle that teachers constitute the primary agents responsible for bringing curriculum to life in kindergarten settings [2]. Nevertheless, educators continue to face difficulties related to fragmented leadership responsibilities, underdeveloped leadership competencies, and insufficient targeted professional support to strengthen their capacity in curriculum leadership roles.

This study examines these tensions through the lens of generative curriculum theory, analyzing the practical conditions that shape kindergarten teachers' capacity to exercise curriculum initiative, and investigating how administrative structures can offer coherent, actionable support to enhance classroom-level responsiveness and pedagogical flexibility [4].

2. Concept Definition and Theoretical Basis

2.1. Creating a Course

The generative curriculum is a child-centered teaching model that dynamically adapts activity content and methods in response to children's interests, needs, and developmental stages. Its core characteristics include uncertainty—curriculum goals and content evolve organically through interaction; subjectivity—children serve as active agents in learning; and participation—teachers and children collaboratively construct meaningful curriculum experiences. Rather than being pre-determined, the curriculum emerges continuously from authentic teacher-child interactions, placing significant demands on educators' professional judgment and curriculum decision-making capabilities [5].

2.2. Teachers' Autonomy in Curriculum Design

Philosophically, the term refers to an individual's capacity to exercise reasoned judgment and self-direction in both personal conduct and professional practice. In early childhood education, teachers' professional agency in curriculum matters manifests across three interrelated dimensions: design agency—selecting or developing curriculum themes and content aligned with children's developmental needs and interests; implementation agency—adapting activity pacing, pedagogical approaches, and classroom organization responsively to children's real-time engagement and learning

cues; and assessment agency—using systematic, observation-based professional judgment to evaluate curriculum effectiveness, rather than relying on externally imposed metrics [3].

Teachers' professional agency in curriculum matters includes both the scope of discretion available during curriculum research, development, and implementation, and the capacity to exercise purposeful, reflective initiative within institutional and policy frameworks—encompassing both awareness of professional responsibility and the practical competencies required to enact it [5].

2.3. The Intrinsic Relationship between Curriculum Generation and Curriculum Autonomy

There exists a mutually reinforcing relationship between generative curriculum and teachers' professional agency in curriculum design: the implementation of generative curriculum presupposes teachers' capacity to make informed decisions regarding curriculum content and pedagogical approaches—if educators are restricted to rigidly following standardized lesson plans, generative curriculum cannot be realized; conversely, meaningful exercise of this professional agency requires generative curriculum as its practical foundation—only when teachers consistently respond to children's interests and developmental needs can such agency evolve from theoretical principle into concrete, reflective practice. Children's interests serve as the foundation and source for curriculum creation, implementation, and evaluation [5]. Curriculum creation is defined as "a process in which kindergarten teachers proactively develop and implement tailored curricula based on children's interests, needs, and developmental stages, leveraging existing resources to effectively foster comprehensive experiential growth and achieve holistic, proactive, and individualized child development".

2.4. Theoretical Perspectives of Analysis

This study adopts the theory of teacher curriculum leadership as its analytical framework. Teacher curriculum leadership denotes the influence teachers exert within school settings, grounded in comprehensive professional competencies and sustained through collaborative interactions aimed at enhancing curriculum quality, advancing teacher professional growth, improving student learning outcomes, and supporting school organizational development. This perspective positions teachers not merely as curriculum implementers but as active curriculum leaders, assuming initiative and responsibility across all phases—including planning, design, delivery, and evaluation [2]. It reframes curriculum agency from a static entitlement to a dynamic capability, underscoring that effective curriculum engagement depends not only on formal authorization but also on the presence of enabling conditions.

Realizing curriculum agency effectively further requires teachers to develop awareness and capacity in identifying and utilizing curriculum resources. Preschool curricula should be rooted in children's lived experiences—whether these involve interactions with peers, adults, or materials, or encompass the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and emotions emerging from such engagements. Kindergarten curricula are best realized through experiential, hands-on learning activities, including observation, exploration, discovery, creative expression, social participation, and aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, instruction cannot rely solely on prescribed textbooks; teachers must recognize pedagogically significant moments in daily interactions with children and thoughtfully integrate them into curriculum content [3, 6]. When teachers' scope for curriculum decision-making is constrained, this process of recognition and integration becomes significantly impeded—they lack both the authority to select meaningful experiences for curriculum inclusion and the flexibility to adapt content in response to children's authentic developmental needs.

3. Value Analysis of Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy from the Perspective of Curriculum Generation

3.1. The Curriculum Design Requires Teachers to Shift from Being Mere "Implementers" to Becoming "Creators"

In the traditional curriculum model, the teacher's core task is implementation—delivering instruction according to textbooks or instructional guides. In contrast, a generative curriculum requires teachers to develop curriculum content dynamically, grounded in children's observed interests and questions during daily activities. This developmental role is not supplementary flexibility but a foundational requirement for curriculum generation. Such development presumes teachers' capacity to make informed decisions about curriculum content; without this capacity, teachers cannot effectively fulfill the role of curriculum developers.

The breadth and quality of teachers' resource development for curriculum innovation depend significantly on their professional awareness of instructional resources. Only when teachers are empowered to assess and select appropriate resources can the curriculum reliably align with children's developmental needs [7, 8].

3.2. The Course Design Requires Teachers to Have Flexible Access to Resources

Curriculum development stems from children's genuine interests, which are often unpredictable [6]. When children discover a particular insect during outdoor activities and develop strong interest in it, teachers need to promptly utilize relevant picture books, tools, and materials to support in-depth exploration. Research has identified 'resource isolation' as a significant obstacle to curriculum innovation—even when teachers identify children's interests, they frequently lack appropriate materials or knowledge support to further develop the curriculum. Effective curriculum development requires adequate human and material resources; thus, their development and utilization inevitably either facilitate or constrain implementation.

3.3. The Curriculum Design Requires Managers to Shift from "Control" to "Support"

From a management perspective, the implementation of curriculum development entails a shift in management logic: administrators can no longer demand that teachers adhere to standards of uniformity and controllability; instead, they must foster an institutional culture that values teachers' professional judgment. The core of curriculum system optimization lies in establishing the belief that trusting teachers is the fundamental principle for implementing kindergarten curricula [1]. Mechanisms such as observation and listening systems focused on children's development, assessment systems that help evaluate teachers' curriculum implementation practices, and teacher-centered self-assessment systems for classroom curriculum quality all share a common objective: transitioning from controlling teachers to supporting their professional agency.

4. The Practical Challenges Facing Teachers' Curriculum Autonomy

The development of kindergarten curricula encounters various operational limitations [9]. These practical difficulties mainly appear in three interrelated dimensions: teachers' limited understanding of children's interests, inconsistencies between their perceived professional roles and actual pedagogical responsibilities, and insufficient access to necessary external support resources. Role-related inconsistencies often lead teachers to rely on personal assumptions rather than systematic observation when interpreting children's interests; concurrently, resource limitations hinder the effective transformation of those interests into meaningful curriculum content. Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of the factors affecting teachers' curriculum decision-making must examine these three dimensions, along with their mutual influences and underlying dynamics.

4.1. De Facto Empowerment: Formal Autonomy Coupled with Substantive Constraints

Kindergarten teachers encounter structural challenges in curriculum development practices, including limited decision-making scope, fragmented resource management, insufficient collaborative mechanisms, and uneven professional development. Teachers frequently observe that formal authority over curriculum matters is not matched by corresponding operational latitude; for instance, adjustments to instructional content or allocation of teaching materials typically require sequential administrative review. While

educators are encouraged to design curricula responsive to children's developmental needs, implementation is shaped by pre-established planning frameworks and fixed scheduling parameters. Although teachers are acknowledged as central participants in curriculum work, final evaluation responsibilities remain with school leadership. This misalignment between procedural expectations and practical implementation results in diminished effectiveness of teacher-led curriculum initiatives.

Fundamentally, this dynamic arises from management approaches prioritizing standardization and consistency. Kindergarten administrators commonly employ tiered approval procedures and uniform curriculum templates to uphold baseline educational quality standards; however, such frameworks may limit responsiveness to contextual variations and evolving pedagogical insights in curriculum design.

4.2. The Institutional Constraints Imposed by Bureaucratic Management on Curriculum Autonomy

Kindergarten management largely retains the characteristics of a bureaucratic organization: clear hierarchies, detailed rules, and an emphasis on execution. Both the curriculum management model and its associated systems underemphasize teachers' role as key participants in curriculum decision-making.

Teachers' daily work follows a tightly structured schedule; weekly teaching activities are guided by standardized planning templates; and monthly curriculum content is outlined in advance—under these institutional arrangements, teachers' professional discretion is exercised within clearly defined operational boundaries. Curriculum development requires responsive adaptability grounded in children's real-time engagement, rather than choices constrained by pre-established parameters.

The core objective of curriculum system optimization is to support teachers in implementing the curriculum with professional confidence and pedagogical competence, rather than strengthening administrative oversight or evaluation functions [10, 11]. Yet in practice, many kindergarten curriculum systems prioritize administrative efficiency over teacher capacity-building.

4.3. Structural Shortcomings in Teachers' Curriculum Competencies

The effective implementation of curriculum decision-making authority requires not only institutional streamlining of administrative procedures but also teachers' capacity to fulfill professional responsibilities. However, kindergarten teachers demonstrate structural gaps in curriculum development competencies. Both pre-service education and in-service professional development offer limited systematic instruction in curriculum design and leadership. Curriculum development capability has historically received insufficient emphasis [12]. Early childhood educators need to strengthen their professional knowledge in care and education, refine pedagogical strategies, and continuously update expertise through training, participation in collaborative learning communities, and self-directed study.

Most preschool teachers have not received systematic instruction in key areas such as transforming children's interests into curriculum content, developing curriculum themes based on observational data, and integrating diverse resources to design curriculum activities. This competency gap manifests in two ways: new teachers often experience uncertainty regarding how to adapt local resources into curriculum content and lack clear, actionable pathways for applying theoretical knowledge in practice; experienced teachers may rely heavily on established routines, show limited capacity for pedagogical innovation, and find it challenging to move beyond textbook-centered instruction. As a result, although institutional frameworks support greater teacher involvement in curriculum decisions, practitioners lack the requisite professional competencies to implement such responsibilities effectively.

4.4. Administrative Tasks Consume Valuable Time and Energy Needed for Curriculum Development

The operational complexity of kindergarten work presents a practical challenge to curriculum development. Given the developmental characteristics of young children and the nature of early childhood education, daily operations involve numerous interwoven tasks that often lack standardization. In such a detail-intensive environment, many teachers find their time and energy significantly constrained, limiting opportunities to strengthen professional competencies related to curriculum design. Routine responsibilities—including documentation, communication with families, classroom environment preparation, and participation in evaluations and inspections—occupy a large share of working hours, reducing capacity for sustained observation of children's learning behaviors and diminishing opportunities to identify meaningful curriculum development pathways [13].

When teachers operate under persistent time pressure, even formal provisions supporting curriculum design are difficult to implement effectively due to insufficient cognitive bandwidth. The reflective practice, systematic observation, and thoughtful planning essential to high-quality curriculum work are all undermined by an overloaded schedule. This underscores that effective curriculum implementation depends not only on policy provisions but also on ensuring adequate time and mental resources for educators.

A deeper consideration concerns how educators engage with curriculum-related responsibilities. During periods of educational adjustment, practitioners tend to adopt one of two orientations: some approach curriculum work with initiative and professional commitment, while others respond with limited engagement following prolonged workload strain. Sustained administrative demands can diminish teachers' capacity to observe children deeply or translate insights into pedagogical action. As a result, well-intentioned provisions for curriculum involvement may fail to stimulate professional growth and instead heighten concerns about meeting expectations. Therefore, allocating sufficient time and support for curriculum-related work is not merely a logistical issue—it is central to cultivating a mindset oriented toward reflective practice and proactive professional development.

5. Management Support: Pathways to Overcoming Challenges

5.1. From "Control" to "Empowerment": A Fundamental Shift in Management Philosophy

To overcome the dilemma of diminished curriculum initiative, the key lies in a fundamental shift in management philosophy. Managers must recognize that teachers' curriculum decision-making authority is not a concession granted by administration, but an essential professional responsibility aligned with educational quality standards. This requires transitioning from a supervisory role to a supportive one—shifting from requiring prior approval for every instructional adjustment to affirming teachers' professional judgment, provided it maintains pedagogical rigor; and moving from enforcing inflexible implementation plans to collaboratively cultivating a shared educational vision.

Kindergarten administrators should proactively address institutional barriers to curriculum innovation and continuously improve systems related to management, teaching research, professional development, and evaluation [4]. When curriculum responsibilities are appropriately delegated to classroom-level teams—ensuring content responsiveness to the developmental needs of children in each group—teachers evolve from implementers into co-creators of learning experiences.

5.2. Flexible Design of the Curriculum System

To address operational rigidity in curriculum management, the system must integrate adaptable mechanisms. Specifically: in planning management, transition from highly prescriptive weekly schedules specifying daily and hourly activities to monthly frameworks that establish clear thematic priorities while permitting responsive weekly adjustments; regarding instructional documentation, minimize redundant lesson plan preparation and substitute standardized lesson notes with concise, reflective post-

instruction records; concerning resource allocation, introduce efficient application pathways for teachers and simplify approval procedures for curriculum adaptations.

Curriculum system optimization centers on strengthening teachers' professional autonomy and confidence in curriculum implementation, rather than enhancing administrative oversight. System design must prioritize supporting teachers' practical curriculum development work, not enabling managerial supervision.

5.3. Incorporating Curriculum Autonomy into the Teacher Professional Development Framework

To address the challenge of "capacity gaps," it is essential to integrate curriculum design and adaptation as a core component of teacher professional development. From the pre-service training phase, "curriculum innovation capability" should be incorporated into the educational objectives of early childhood education programs; during in-service training, teachers should be supported through case studies, peer collaboration, and expert guidance to strengthen their ability to identify meaningful curriculum development opportunities aligned with children's interests and developmental needs [14, 15].

Curriculum innovation functions as a collaborative practice involving teachers, young children, parents, and community members, who jointly contribute expertise and resources to co-construct learning experiences [16]. Within this collaborative ecosystem, teachers' curriculum design authority operates within structured institutional support and shared professional frameworks—termed "supported professional agency." Kindergarten administrators should establish diverse communication platforms to foster open, timely, and constructive dialogue among teaching staff, enabling them to share insights, reflections, and practical feedback on curriculum implementation.

5.4. Creating Time and Space for Teachers to Engage in "Deep Work"

To address the challenge of administrative burdens, school leaders must deliberately allocate dedicated time and space for teachers to participate in curriculum development. Key strategies include: systematically reviewing and eliminating redundant documentation requirements to alleviate teachers' workloads; strategically minimizing non-essential administrative duties during pivotal stages of curriculum design; and implementing structured time provisions for collaborative initiatives that promote curricular innovation [9].

6. Conclusion

The widespread integration of curriculum philosophy has shifted kindergarten teachers' curriculum decision-making from an academic consideration tied to professional responsibilities into a practical dimension of curriculum implementation. This study identifies several persistent challenges—including diminished opportunities for professional input, administrative procedural requirements, gaps in curriculum-related competencies, and disproportionate non-instructional workload—and attributes these not to individual teacher capacity but to systemic features of educational management structures.

Supporting teachers' curriculum decision-making reflects a transition from directive oversight to enabling leadership. This shift requires administrators to affirm teachers' professional expertise and embed supportive conditions within institutional frameworks—serving both as a mechanism to uphold professional responsibilities and as a foundational element for advancing preschool curriculum practice. Progress in curriculum development depends critically on cultivating collaborative curriculum design communities: dynamic, practice-based networks where teachers, children, families, and community members engage meaningfully toward shared educational aims. Sustained high-quality preschool education rests fundamentally on the capacity of every teacher to exercise informed, context-responsive decision-making in curriculum work.

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