

Article

Analysis of the Development Patterns of Rural Kindergartens Against the Background of Population Changes: A Study Based on Investigations of Three Rural Kindergartens in Shiqiu Town, Nanjing

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Abstract: In recent years, big changes in China's population have caused serious problems for rural kindergartens. This study looks at the sustainable development of rural kindergartens during these population changes. It focuses on three rural kindergartens in Shiqiu Town, Nanjing. The research uses interviews, observations, and case studies. It studies the connection between population changes and how rural kindergartens develop. It also looks for ways to solve problems and face challenges. The study shows that changes in the local population affect how many children enroll, how the kindergartens are run, the development of teachers, and the teaching methods. Rural kindergartens face problems in running the school, planning lessons, and managing staff. The study suggests ways to help rural kindergartens grow sustainably. These include strategies made by the kindergartens, support from the government, and teamwork between kindergartens, families, and communities.

Keywords: population changes; rural kindergartens; development patterns; investigation study

1. Introduction

The quality of rural education affects how well China's rural revitalization strategy works [1]. Rural preschool education is the first step in the rural education system [2]. It is important for fairness in education and improving education quality. It is also a key part of building a high-quality education system. Promoting good and fair development of rural preschool education is very important for rural revitalization [3,4].

In recent years, China's population has changed a lot. Birth rates are going down, the population is aging, and more people are moving to cities [5]. Fewer children and more migration have reduced the number of people living in rural areas [6]. This causes serious problems for rural kindergartens. Student numbers are falling, some kindergartens are closing, school sizes are getting smaller, resources are not fully used, and there are too many teachers in some places. Many small rural kindergartens must merge, close, or change their functions. This makes it hard for them to survive.

This study looks at the sustainable development of three rural kindergartens in Shiqiu Town, Nanjing. It studies the connection between population changes and kindergarten development. It also looks for ways to solve problems and overcome difficulties. The aim is to give practical advice and theoretical support to improve care and education in rural kindergartens and to help rural preschool education grow in a healthy and sustainable way.

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2. Methodology

2.1. Settings and participants

This study looks at Shiqiu Town in Lishui District, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. The town is near the main urban area of Nanjing. It is an important point for the city's southern expansion. The town shows both city and rural features. Shiqiu University Town is complete, and new residential and commercial areas like Biguyuan have been built. The town is growing fast, and the population is becoming more stable. At the same time, there are still many rural areas where farming and traditional village life continue. This mix of fast urban growth and village hollowing provides a good setting for this study.

The study focuses on three rural kindergartens in Shiqiu Town. They are very different from each other. One is a public kindergarten in the town center. One is attached to a residential community. One is a village-level kindergarten. Choosing these three shows different development patterns and ways to handle changes in population.

2.1.1. Z-Kindergarten

Z-Kindergarten is a public central kindergarten in the main area of Shiqiu Street. It is the largest and best kindergarten in the area. It leads preschool education and supports teaching and research. It also helps manage village-level kindergartens and improves preschool education quality in the region. This kindergarten is the main site for this study.

2.1.2. B-Kindergarten

B-Kindergarten is part of a residential and commercial community in the town. It is at the edge of Shiqiu University Town and Biguyuan. Most students are children of homeowners nearby or children of migrant workers in the area. This kindergarten helps serve the growing population and the needs of new urban communities.

2.1.3. X-Kindergarten

X-Kindergarten is a public kindergarten run by the village under Shiqiu Street. It is in Xizhuang Village, far from the town center. It serves children from three nearby villages. This kindergarten provides basic resources and support for rural preschool education. It is the last point of the public service network for rural kindergartens in the area.

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Participant observations

This study mainly uses participant observation. The researcher spent 2--3 months as an intern at Z-Kindergarten to join the daily work of rural kindergartens. Observations focused on four areas. First, how space and resources are actually used. Second, how population changes affect teaching activities. Third, how teacher-child interactions change. Fourth, how teachers adjust the curriculum during teaching. A semi-structured observation form was used to keep records clear and organized. The form focused on key points like the use of the environment and changes in student numbers. During recording, the researcher kept facts separate from personal reflections [7]. This method captured real situations and showed how kindergartens deal with population changes.

2.2.2. Interviews

The study used semi-structured interviews. Different interview guides were used for different people. Interviews with kindergarten directors asked about planning, resource use, staff management, and ways to handle changes in student numbers. Interviews with teachers asked about teaching adjustments and professional support. All interviews were recorded and written word for word. Then, the data was analyzed using thematic coding. The researcher used trust built in the field to help participants recall key events and decisions [8]. This improved the depth of the interviews. The study also used local population statistics, preschool policy documents, and school records. These were

compared with observations and interviews to give a full picture of rural kindergarten development.

2.3. Case study

This study used a multiple-case design with three different rural kindergartens in Shiqiu Town. Over three years, the study looked at changes in student numbers, resource use, and curriculum. Different kinds of kindergartens were also compared. The study checked similarities and differences across the three cases. Data from observations, interviews, and documents were compared. This helped find common patterns and special differences. The results provide evidence for making policies and practical steps to help rural kindergartens grow.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

The data for this study comes from three main parts.

The first part is population data from the region. The researcher gathered the National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletins for Lishui District, Nanjing, from 2022 to 2024. The researcher extracted important data about population changes. Descriptive statistics were used to understand overall population trends. This data helps explain changes in student numbers at rural kindergartens.

The second part is basic information about the kindergartens. The researcher collected data about the three kindergartens from public records, bulletin board updates, official WeChat accounts, and information gathered during the internship. This data includes class schedules, student numbers, and staff information.

The third part is qualitative data. The researcher collected this through observation and interviews during a 2-3 month internship. For observation, the researcher recorded eight standardized observation sessions. These sessions looked at things like how space is used, how teaching activities are organized, teacher-child interactions, and how the curriculum is adjusted. For interviews, four in-depth semi-structured interviews were done. One interview was with a kindergarten director, and three were with teachers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in about 25,000 words of text. The researcher then analyzed all the qualitative data by coding it.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Population change characteristics in Shiqiu Town (2022-2024)

This section is based on the National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletins for Lishui District, Nanjing, officially released for the years 2022 to 2024. It combines in-depth interviews with kindergarten directors and frontline teachers, as well as observations made by the researcher at Z-Kindergarten in Shiqiu, to systematically outline the population change characteristics in Shiqiu Town over the past three years from two dimensions: birth rate and demographic flow, and the supply structure of preschool-age children.

At the level of total population, the birth rate has continued to decline. According to regional macro data, the birth rate of the resident population in Lishui District has shown a significant downward trend: it was 6.93‰ in 2022, decreased to 6.77‰ in 2023, and further dropped to 6.43‰ in 2024. Over the three years, the cumulative decline was 0.50 per thousand, representing a decrease of 7.2%. As a subdistrict of Lishui, the population changes in Shiqiu Town are also influenced by this macro trend. Although there are no publicly available precise population statistics at the township level, the continuous decline in the district's birth rate directly determines the contraction of the total supply of preschool-age children in Shiqiu Town.

In terms of demographic flow, there is a coexistence of inflows to the town area and outflows to urban areas, which further exacerbates fluctuations in the total number of students. On one hand, with the construction of Shiqiu University Town and the development of residential projects like Biguiyuan, the surrounding rural population has

gradually concentrated in the town area, creating a certain inflow effect, with children of migrant workers becoming a major source of students for some kindergartens. On the other hand, some local families, in search of higher-quality educational resources, choose to send their children to attend schools in Lishui's urban area or even in the main urban area of Nanjing, which has become an important factor affecting the stability of student enrollment within the jurisdiction.

3.2. *Development status of three rural kindergartens*

3.2.1. Scale and structure of student enrollment

In terms of student enrollment, the survey found that all three kindergartens are seeing fewer students because the regional birth rate is going down. For example, Z-Kindergarten, the biggest public kindergarten in the area, has had fewer students for the past three years. In just one year, it lost more than 100 students. Now, it has four K3 classes (5-6 years), three K2 classes (4-5 years), and only two K1 classes (3-4 years). This results in a class structure like an "inverted pyramid."

The study also found that enrollment changes are linked to the local economy. Z-Kindergarten and B-Kindergarten, which are in busy areas near the town center and university town, have more stable enrollment because of population growth. But in rural areas far from the town center, there are fewer children of preschool age. For example, X-Kindergarten, a village-based kindergarten, had to close because there weren't enough students. The director said that if enrollment keeps dropping, more village-based kindergartens might close.

For enrollment structure, the family backgrounds of children are more diverse. The number of children from migrant worker families is increasing, creating a mix of local and migrant children. Another important point is that the number of "left-behind children" in rural areas has gone down [9]. This doesn't mean parents are more present, though. Instead, more grandparents are taking care of children. Many teachers said that in both local and migrant worker families, grandparents are mainly responsible for taking children to school and looking after them. This is now the most common way of raising young children in the area.

3.2.2. Operational organization model

Rural kindergartens face fewer students, but their operations show both stability and active changes.

Government financial support helps public rural kindergartens keep running. This support lets them continue daily teaching and care activities without major problems.

At the same time, kindergartens are making changes to deal with low enrollment. Some are closing village-based kindergartens with very few students. Many are planning classes for younger children, aged 2-3 years, to attract more students. They are also trying harder to recruit students. Instead of waiting for parents to enroll children, kindergartens now reach out to families. During enrollment time, they visit villages, check how many preschool-age children live there, and start early recruitment campaigns. They also follow up with families to make sure children enroll.

3.2.3. Teacher workforce development

The survey found that while the teacher workforce in rural kindergartens is generally stable, there are still many problems.

Staffing is getting tighter, so fewer new teachers are being hired. At the same time, some teachers are leaving. For example, at Z-Kindergarten, fewer students have led to no new hires in recent years, which has reduced the total number of teachers. In the last three years, two teachers left: one moved to an urban kindergarten, and the other left the preschool education field completely.

There are also differences between local and non-local teachers when it comes to career goals. Local teachers stay more often because they are already part of the

community and feel a strong connection to their work. One local teacher, Ms. G, said, "My home is here." On the other hand, younger teachers from outside the area care more about things like career opportunities and living conditions, so they are more likely to leave. Non-local teacher Ms. L said, "I still want to have a better platform."

Teachers also have different needs for professional development. While general training covers basic needs, teachers at different career stages need different types of support. Older teachers want help with things like teaching art and creating lesson materials. Younger teachers need more help with inclusive education and taking care of children with special needs. This shows the need for a training system that can be flexible and meet different needs.

3.2.4. Educational and teaching practices

The survey found several key points about teaching in rural kindergartens.

One main feature is the use of local resources in the curriculum. All three kindergartens include resources from the Shiqiu region. They have seasonal harvest activities with nearby farms. They celebrate traditional festivals like the "Rice Flower Festival." They also include folk culture, such as dragon dances, in lessons. One principal said that the countryside's natural and cultural environment is a main advantage. This makes these kindergartens different from city kindergartens. Classroom observations showed that teachers use rice, pine cones, and branches in activity areas and the classroom environment.

Another feature is mixed-age teaching. Teachers teach children of different ages in the same class. This happens especially in village kindergartens where student numbers are falling. Observations showed that teachers give more individual guidance in these classes. They focus on children's different needs and help children with special needs.

A third problem is working with grandparents who care for children. Many children are looked after by grandparents. Their ideas about education are often different from the kindergarten's. Teachers gave examples in interviews. For example, when children have delayed language development, grandparents mostly care about whether the child is "learning well" and less about health or social skills. Teachers said that grandparents often find it hard to understand or follow professional advice.

3.3. Core dilemmas facing the development of rural kindergartens in the context of population change

3.3.1. Operational dilemmas

Rural kindergartens face a long-term survival problem because fewer children are enrolling. The birth rate is going down. This means the number of preschool-age children in the area will keep falling in the next three to five years. Kindergartens have less pressure on their size, and it is hard to keep large-scale operations. The problem is bigger because some children move to cities. This changes how many children are left and increases operational pressure.

There is also a conflict between efficiency and fairness. Closing village teaching points with few students and putting resources into central town kindergartens can keep operations efficient. But this makes it harder for children in remote areas to attend preschool. They have to travel farther and spend more on transport. This puts kindergartens and authorities in a hard position. They must balance keeping operations efficient and giving fair access to education.

Recruiting new students is also getting harder. Active recruitment can help at first, but it costs more money and work. At the same time, fewer children are born, so there are fewer preschoolers to enroll. This makes recruitment less effective. As a result, kindergartens work harder, but competition increases and enrollment does not rise.

3.3.2. Curricular dilemmas

The use of local resources in rural kindergartens is still mostly shallow. Many kindergartens have started making curricula with local materials. These activities are often separate events and not part of a complete plan. Teachers do not always have the skills to turn local resources into regular lessons. This makes it hard for kindergartens to build a strong curriculum that stands out from city kindergartens. Because of this, the full value of local curricula is not yet used.

Curriculum design is also a big challenge. Standard lessons do not meet the needs of mixed-age classes, migrant children, or children cared for by grandparents. There are few lessons for children with special needs. The curriculum often ignores the emotional and social development of children raised by grandparents. This makes the lessons not match the children's real-life situations.

Weak communication between home and kindergarten also causes problems. In homes with grandparents caring for children, the ideas and lessons from kindergarten often do not continue at home. This makes the curriculum less effective. Problems with talking and working together between families and kindergartens make it harder to give children a clear and useful learning experience.

3.3.3. Staffing dilemmas

Staffing in Shiqiu Town's rural kindergartens has stayed mostly stable. Few teachers have left in the past three years. Still, problems with the workforce are growing.

One big problem is the aging staff. Fewer children are enrolling, so kindergartens are not hiring new teachers. This makes the average age of staff higher. There are few middle-aged or young key teachers. This means there is no clear plan for replacing older teachers. In the next few years, many retirements are expected. This raises worries about keeping enough teachers.

Another problem is that teachers' skills do not always match the changing needs. Changes in enrollment put more demands on teachers. They need to talk to grandparents, teach mixed-age classes, and support children with special needs. But training mostly focuses on old teaching methods. It does not give support for teachers at different career stages. This lack of training makes it hard to improve teaching quality.

A third problem is more work and less sense of being valued. New responsibilities include recruiting students, working with special families, and making lessons for mixed-age classes. These increase teachers' workloads. At the same time, parents cooperate less, there are few chances for promotion, and teachers feel less satisfied. This makes teachers feel burned out.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the aforementioned findings, in order to address the development dilemmas faced by rural kindergartens in the context of population change and to promote their sustainable development, this paper proposes the following recommendations from three perspectives: targeted strategies by rural kindergartens, precise support from government departments, and collaborative education between kindergartens, families, and communities.

4.1. *At the rural kindergarten level: implement differentiated measures based on local conditions*

4.1.1. Adjust operational models

Population in rural areas is getting older, and fewer children are being born. Some rural kindergartens with low-quality teaching may need to move from combined classes or mergers to closing. This can improve the overall quality of education in the long run. It may also leave some facilities unused and waste resources. Population changes affect how educational resources are used. Understanding these changes is very important.

Kindergartens can adjust how they operate. In areas with few people and hard transport, boarding public kindergartens could be set up. In areas with more people and

easy transport, free school buses could be provided. In areas with low enrollment, kindergartens could merge with nearby schools. This helps children have peers and keeps education quality.

The three kindergartens studied can use different strategies.

Z-Kindergarten has good facilities and enough teachers, but enrollment is falling. Extra space could be used as a parent-child activity center or an early education service point. It could help weaker kindergartens by sending teachers to them. It could also offer care services for infants aged 0-3 to get more students.

B-Kindergarten serves mostly migrant children and has families with different backgrounds. It could make special lessons for cultural integration. It could also create lessons that meet different needs of parents and children. It could work more with the local community to raise its reputation.

For closed village teaching points, other service models can be tried. Teachers could visit regularly from the central kindergarten. A bus system and boarding at the central kindergarten could be set up, with travel costs helped by the government. Empty kindergarten buildings could be used for parent-child activities, parent classes, and other services. This makes better use of resources.

4.1.2. Strengthen teacher workforce development

Teachers are very important for rural kindergartens. They lead education and help improve rural areas.

It is important to help teachers feel connected to the local community. Feeling connected helps teachers stay in their jobs and work better. Feeling connected means knowing and respecting local culture, being part of the community, and having a clear identity. Kindergartens can support this by creating a friendly environment and organizing local cultural activities. This helps teachers from outside feel part of the community and care more about the area.

The training system also needs to improve. Teachers have different needs. Older teachers need help with technology for teaching. Younger teachers need guidance in inclusive education. A tiered training system can help. Older teachers can get special IT training. Younger teachers can get training in inclusive education. Experts can also visit kindergartens to give guidance on real teaching problems. This helps teachers with practical challenges in their daily work.

4.1.3. Optimizing the curriculum system

As teaching changes, the value of local and natural resources in rural areas is being recognized more. Using these resources in lessons helps meet kindergarten education goals and makes the curriculum more interesting and fun. It also supports children's full development.

Right now, the use of local resources in rural kindergartens is scattered and not deep. To fix this, local resources should be used in a planned way for the curriculum. A resource library can be made with goals and activities for different ages. Local culture should be part of daily lessons. Also, a system for parents and teachers to work together should be set up. This helps parents join in classroom activities, understand different ways of caregiving, and support the lessons.

Curriculum design should also meet the needs of migrant children, children raised by grandparents, and children with special needs. This makes the lessons more inclusive and fitting. Special lessons can be made to help with challenges like language delays or behavior problems. Peer support can be used to help children get involved. For children raised by grandparents, programs can teach scientific parenting ideas through examples and real-life practice. This helps grandparents work with teachers on the lessons. A system for tracking children's progress can be used to check how they are doing. Teachers, parents, and doctors can work together to change the teaching plan when needed.

4.2. *At the government and education department level: strengthening precise support and improving the support system*

4.2.1. Optimizing resource allocation and improving investment efficiency

Rural student enrollment is going down, and some resources are not being used. The government should change from giving money to each kindergarten to giving money based on what is needed. This will help use resources better.

A good way to do this is to change how kindergartens are placed and use current resources more. Kindergartens should be set up based on population trends, and small kindergartens should merge over time. The "one kindergarten, multiple points" model can also be tried. Unused buildings can be turned into public spaces like parent-child activity centers or childcare service points. This will help use buildings better.

More money should also be spent, and the way money is spent should be better. The government should put more money into kindergartens and raise the money spent on each child, especially for weaker kindergartens. Special funds for rural kindergartens should be made to keep supporting them.

Lastly, sharing resources between cities and rural areas is important. Good resources from cities should be brought to rural areas through group schools and city-rural pairing projects. A quality system for rural preschool education should also be set up to make sure education stays at a good level.

4.2.2. Strengthening policy supply and implementing precise safeguards

To fix the problems in rural kindergartens, we need clear and specific policies.

Teacher policies should be better to keep teachers in their jobs. Rural teachers should get living allowances, and non-regular teachers should have their benefits increased over time. Teachers doing the same work should get the same pay. Teachers who stay in rural areas for a long time should get priority for promotions and job changes. Also, the number of teachers should be balanced to reduce their workload.

Special education policies also need to improve to make sure all children get good education. Policies for inclusive education in rural kindergartens should be made. There should also be ways to find and assess children with special needs early. Support should be given to hire full-time and part-time special education teachers. Different departments should work together to provide the best care for these children.

4.2.3. Enhancing the training system and improving professional competence

To make the teacher training system better, resources should be organized and grouped in a clear and simple way.

A tiered system should be made for training. Older teachers should get training in technology. Younger teachers should get special training in inclusive education and working with parents. Principals should get training to improve their leadership and management skills.

Training methods should also be changed to be more effective. Flexible methods like "teaching sent to the countryside" and "on-the-job training" should be used. A teacher exchange and rotation system between cities and rural areas should also be set up.

Building a digital training platform is important. The platform should bring together good courses and teaching materials. It should allow teachers to work together online and have remote teaching sessions. This will help overcome problems with distance.

4.2.4. Improving collaborative mechanisms and constructing a co-education ecosystem

The government should coordinate and help set up a system where different groups work together in education.

Departments need to work together better. A joint meeting system should be set up. The education department should lead the meetings, and other departments should join. This will help make rural preschool education more coordinated.

Supervision and evaluation should also be stronger. Rural preschool education should be part of local government performance checks. Policies and teaching quality should be checked regularly. Results from these checks should be used to make sure all measures are followed correctly.

4.3. At the community, family, and school collaboration level: uniting efforts in education to build a supportive ecosystem

4.3.1. Improving home-school communication mechanisms to enhance co-education effectiveness

Home-school co-education is important for improving education in rural kindergartens. To solve problems like different parenting styles, old ideas from parents, and weak home-school communication, a regular and simple way to communicate should be set up.

Communication methods should be improved by using tools like parent meetings, home visits, contact books, and WeChat groups. This will help create a system where information about children's performance and growth is shared quickly. Parents should also get help through activities like parenting classes, child-rearing talks, and open house events. This will teach parents better ways to care for their children and improve family education, especially for grandparents.

A way to solve problems between home and school should also be set up. This will help quickly answer parents' questions, fix conflicts about different ways of teaching, and create a better relationship between home and school.

4.3.2. Activating community educational resources to expand learning opportunities

Rural communities have many natural, cultural, and social resources. These resources can support and add to kindergarten education. The community should be fully used to create a learning system of "kindergarten--home--community."

Community resources can be used by including nature, farming culture, traditional skills, and local stories in lessons and activities. Community practice bases should be set up. Children can go to fields, village museums, and farms regularly. They can take part in visits and hands-on work to learn more about society and practical skills.

Community resources can also be used by inviting local talents, respected elders, and university student volunteers to join kindergarten activities. This will create support from many people and groups.

4.3.3. Building regional collaborative platforms to promote resource sharing

Rural kindergartens often face problems like being small, spread out, and lacking resources. This makes it hard for them to meet all their needs alone. The focus should be on creating a system where different schools work together, connecting cities and rural areas, and involving many groups.

A community for preschool education in towns should be set up. This community can bring together resources from nearby kindergartens. It can help with activities like joint teaching, teacher exchanges, and creating curriculum together. This will allow schools to work together and grow together.

A digital sharing platform should also be made. This platform should use technology to bring together good courses, training materials, and expert help. It can help overcome distance problems and give ongoing support to rural kindergartens.

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