

## Article

# Path dependence and institutional breakthrough: The transformation of children's education welfare policy in China

 Hongyu Chen <sup>1,\*</sup>
<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China

\* Correspondence: Hongyu Chen, Faculty of Education, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China

**Abstract:** Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the national children's education welfare policy has undergone three major historical stages: early exploratory development under the traditional planned economy, comprehensive institutional adjustment driven by the transition to a socialist market economy, and integrated innovation tailored to the requirements of the new era. The profound transformation of China's children's education welfare policy has been fundamentally driven by a threefold structural logic. This framework consists of ongoing political system reform, the rapidly advancing level of macroeconomic development, and the gradual transformation of underlying cultural values regarding child-rearing and education. At the same time, viewed through the theoretical lens of historical institutionalism, this policy evolution has exhibited a distinct pattern of path dependence. Under the persistent influence of complex factors such as institutional cost effects, organizational learning effects, systemic coordination effects, and societal adaptive expectations, this path dependence has frequently hindered rapid policy change and structural breakthroughs. At present, despite significant progress, major systemic challenges remain deeply entrenched. These include the unequal regional distribution of high-quality educational resources, excessive academic pressure placed on students, and the broader demographic context of persistently low fertility rates. Looking ahead, to overcome these institutional bottlenecks, it is absolutely necessary to strengthen comprehensive legal safeguards, optimize the equitable allocation of public resources, and build a diversified collaborative governance mechanism. Ultimately, these strategic interventions are essential in order to successfully promote the sustainable, high-quality development of children's education welfare across the nation.

**Keywords:** historical institutionalism; education welfare; policy change; path dependence; child development

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## 1. Introduction

Children are the future of the nation and the hope of its people [1]. Children's education welfare policy refers to the systematic welfare measures implemented by the state to safeguard children's right to education and promote their all-round development through the formulation of policies and regulations, fiscal investment, and the provision of public services. The degree to which children's education welfare policy is developed not only concerns the growth and development of children as individuals, but also provides foundational and strategic support for national talent cultivation and social progress as a whole.

Amid significant global changes and shifting principal social contradictions, children's education welfare policy has appeared somewhat inadequate in addressing the problem of unbalanced and insufficient educational development. Studies have shown that the unequal distribution of educational resources remains a serious issue. Although the state has introduced the "Double Reduction" policy, children still experience considerable academic pressure [1]. Children's mental health problems also remain a matter of concern. In addition, since 2017, China's fertility rate has continued to decline.

The universal three-child policy has failed to reverse this trend. In 2024, the number of births for the year was 9.54 million, with a birth rate of only 6.77‰, while the natural population growth rate remained negative for three consecutive years. Improving children's education welfare would help reduce the cost of childrearing for families and thereby increase their willingness to have children, alleviating pressure on the demographic structure. How to safeguard children's physical and mental health, relieve their academic burden, and reverse the continued decline in fertility has become an urgent issue.

As a typical embedded institution, the effectiveness of children's education welfare policy depends not only on its textual design, but also on the degree to which it is coupled with the political system, the level of economic development, and prevailing cultural values [1]. The same is true of its formulation and transformation. In the current era, it is essential to grasp the internal logic underlying changes in children's education welfare policy, promote the healthy growth of children, and provide valuable resources and enduring momentum for the country's sustainable development.

## **2. The evolution of children's education welfare policy in china**

The development of children's education welfare policy in China was a gradual historical process rather than an overnight achievement. Within the context of China's broader social transformation, this evolution can be categorized into three distinct stages: the initial exploratory phase under the planned economy, the phase of institutional adjustment under the market economy, and the phase of integrated innovation in the new era [2].

### *2.1. The initial exploratory stage under the planned economy (1949–1978)*

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, the state faced the urgent tasks of consolidating political power, restoring the economy, and improving the quality of the population. Under the planned economy, children's education welfare policy was closely tied to national development strategy [3]. Through centralized planning and resource allocation, the state aimed to provide children with basic educational opportunities and establish a foundation for national education.

At the institutional level, a basic framework for children's education welfare gradually emerged. The general direction of mass-oriented education was established, providing an institutional basis for safeguarding children's right to education. Governments at all levels were required to establish special schools for children with special needs, reflecting comprehensive state planning and concern for different groups of children [4]. Efforts were made to eradicate illiteracy, universalize primary education, expand rural secondary schools, and increase preschool access. These measures rapidly expanded educational provision, and the number of primary schools, enrolled students, and school-age enrollment rates rose substantially, demonstrating significant progress in advancing children's education in China.

During this stage, children's education welfare policy emphasized state coordination, protection of basic educational rights, and alignment with industrialization, forming an institutional system centered on basic education. However, it also revealed a pronounced urban-rural dual structure [4]. Welfare and educational resources were concentrated in cities, leaving rural children with weaker protection despite efforts to expand access through community-run schools. Weak teaching staff, inadequate facilities, and inflexible state resource allocation constrained educational quality and efficiency. Policy formulation and implementation stagnated during certain periods, yet this stage laid the foundation for later reforms, particularly in the universalization of basic education and the enhancement of population quality.

### *2.2. The stage of institutional adjustment under the market economy (1978--the Early Twenty-First Century)*

Reform and opening up brought profound changes to Chinese society, and children's education welfare policy underwent major transformation. During this period,

educational reform became the main driving force of policy change, while the rise of private education injected new vitality into the field [5].

In educational administration, the principle of "local responsibility and hierarchical management" was gradually established. The Decision on the Reform of the Educational System assigned authority over basic education to local governments, breaking with the rigid administrative model of the planned economy [1]. The Compulsory Education Law further institutionalized this arrangement, and later reforms clarified county-based responsibility for rural compulsory education and strengthened the accountability of governments at all levels.

At the same time, private education emerged and expanded rapidly. Article 19 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China provided a legal basis for social actors to establish schools [6]. Subsequent regulations further standardized private education. The Outline for China's Education Reform and Development explicitly called for changing the pattern of government monopoly in education, and the Law on the Promotion of Privately Run Education marked the beginning of law-based governance in this sector. Private schools, with greater autonomy in educational philosophy, curriculum, and teaching methods, helped meet diverse family needs and encouraged competition and innovation in public education.

In preschool education, the Kindergarten Management Regulations and later Kindergarten Work Regulations established a more standardized framework for kindergarten management and development. The Outline of China's Child Development in the 1990s promoted preschool expansion through multiple channels and encouraged social participation, thereby fostering a system of joint public-private provision [2].

In special education, a series of laws and regulations provided legal guarantees for children with disabilities to receive education [7]. Meanwhile, inclusive education was gradually promoted through encouraging mainstream schools to admit children with disabilities.

This period also witnessed the rise of *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality-oriented education). As China's economy shifted toward more technology- and knowledge-intensive development, demands for innovative and well-rounded talent increased. Major policy documents emphasized moving beyond exam-oriented education and fostering students' innovative spirit, practical ability, and all-round development. This reflected an important transition in children's education welfare from a model focused primarily on protection to one emphasizing development [5].

Overall, children's education welfare policy during this period became increasingly diversified and legalized [4]. Government remained the leading actor, but social forces also participated more actively. Policy scope expanded to preschool, compulsory, and special education, and the legal framework became more complete. However, major problems remained, including persistent regional and urban-rural disparities, irregularities in private education, and difficulty implementing quality-oriented education because of the continued dominance of exam-oriented thinking. Nevertheless, this period laid a solid foundation for the modernization of children's education in China.

### *2.3. The stage of integrated innovation in the new era (from the Early Twenty-First Century to the Present)*

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, children's education welfare policy has entered a stage of integrated innovation [6]. As public demand for fairer and higher-quality education has grown, policy has increasingly focused on improving both quality and equity.

In preschool education, inclusive preschool education became a major policy priority. Policies emphasized public welfare and inclusiveness, called for vigorously developing public kindergartens, and supported private providers of inclusive services [1]. Several three-year action plans and increased fiscal investment have greatly expanded preschool resources. By 2024, inclusive kindergartens accounted for 87.26% of all kindergartens nationwide, children enrolled in such institutions represented 91.61% of total

kindergarten enrollment, and the gross preschool enrollment rate reached 92.00%. These figures indicate that inclusive preschool policy has achieved notable results.

In compulsory education, high-quality balanced development became the core orientation [8]. The revised Compulsory Education Law required the rational allocation of educational resources and promoted balanced development as a legal obligation of governments at all levels. Policies further advanced fee exemptions, regional balance, and the overall layout of compulsory education. By the end of 2021, all 2,895 counties in China had passed the national assessment for basic balanced development, and in 2024 the retention rate for nine-year compulsory education reached 95.9%.

At the same time, rapid social and technological change created new challenges, especially in mental health and academic pressure. Planning emphasized mental health education, family education, and reduced academic burden. Later policies, such as guidelines for mental health education in primary and secondary schools, action plans for the mental health of children and adolescents, and the "Double Reduction" policy, further addressed these concerns. Subsequent planning continued this direction, placing greater emphasis on all-round development, family support, and risk prevention in response to new social needs.

Finally, the legal framework for children's healthy development has continued to improve. Revisions to various education-related laws, together with the enactment of new legislation, have strengthened the rights-based legal system surrounding children's education welfare. These developments reflect active responses to the challenges of the new era and have provided stronger institutional support for safeguarding children's educational rights and healthy development.

### **3. Interpreting the trajectory of change in china's children's education welfare policy**

The explanatory power of historical institutionalism lies primarily in its structural and historical perspectives, both of which emphasize that policy change is embedded in temporally accumulated institutions and broader socio-political contexts. From this perspective, the evolution of China's children's education welfare policy reflects not only historically conditioned continuity but also the institutional constraints and incentives generated by earlier policy choices.

#### *3.1. Factors hindering institutional change*

A central insight of historical institutionalism is that earlier institutional arrangements shape later policy options, often generating path dependence. Once a policy trajectory becomes institutionalized, the costs of departure rise and reform becomes increasingly difficult. In the case of China's children's education welfare policy, path dependence has been reinforced by four interrelated mechanisms: cost effects, learning effects, coordination effects, and adaptive expectations.

##### *3.1.1. Cost effects: increasing exit costs*

Since 1949, children's education welfare policy in China has evolved through continuous institutional layering rather than abrupt replacement [9]. During early industrialization and the urban-rural division of labor, China established a welfare structure characterized by pronounced urban-rural dualism. Over time, sustained investment in this model has significantly increased the costs associated with institutional departure.

First, educational resources have historically been concentrated in urban areas. Under market conditions, capital, talent, and public resources tend to flow toward locations with higher returns, leaving rural areas vulnerable to persistent resource outflow. Second, decades of policy implementation have created entrenched interests and established behavioral routines, making reform highly systemic rather than isolated to specific sectors [10]. Third, new policy initiatives must navigate complex administrative procedures and implementation constraints, requiring ongoing resource coordination and conflict resolution. Consequently, governments often prefer incremental reform over

radical restructuring. While this gradual approach may reduce short-term disruption, it also limits the transformative potential of children's education welfare policy.

### 3.1.2. Learning effects: reinforcing the existing structure

Path dependence is sustained not only through passive institutional inertia but also through active learning by policy actors. After policies are introduced, governments, schools, and families gradually adapt to established policy routines and develop preferences for familiar, lower-risk solutions. This makes reform costly because it requires actors to acquire new knowledge, adjust expectations, and bear transitional uncertainty.

For governments, policy learning often occurs through local experimentation and pilot programs, whose successful experiences are later scaled up and incorporated into national policy design. Local authorities, in turn, refine these practices in light of regional conditions. For schools, learning effects emerge through repeated implementation and inter-school imitation, allowing them to incorporate new policy requirements without fundamentally disrupting existing teaching structures. The expansion of inclusive education illustrates this process: rather than reconstructing ordinary schooling, many schools accommodated children with special needs within mainstream classrooms while preserving the basic instructional model. Parents, similarly, interpret and respond to policy through learned experience, adjusting educational strategies according to household resources and perceived opportunities [11]. In practice, this often reinforces competition for high-quality urban schooling. In this sense, learning effects stabilize the existing institutional order even while appearing adaptive.

### 3.1.3. Coordination effects: constraints on policy innovation

Policy implementation also generates coordination effects, whereby repeated interaction among state agencies, schools, and families produces relatively stable patterns of cooperation. These arrangements reduce the costs of routine governance but can also hinder institutional innovation by confining actors to established modes of collaboration.

Within the state apparatus, children's education welfare policy is embedded in both horizontal and vertical coordination structures. Horizontally, multiple departments share responsibility for educational welfare through legal and administrative divisions of labor [12]. Vertically, central authorities define broad policy directions, while local governments formulate context-specific implementation measures. This multilayered governance structure creates dense institutional coupling, meaning that even limited reform may require negotiation across numerous administrative actors, thereby reducing policy efficiency.

A similar pattern exists in school-family relations. Long-standing arrangements have largely assigned schools a dominant role in education while parents play a supporting role. Although this reduces the transaction costs of routine cooperation, it weakens the implementation of policies that require substantial parental engagement, such as parent-child education within quality-oriented education reform.

More importantly, children's education welfare policy is embedded in a wider institutional network rather than operating autonomously. Its interaction with the educational evaluation system is particularly significant. The long-standing dominance of the gaokao as the core mechanism of social selection has produced a mutually reinforcing relationship between welfare provision, school practices, labor market screening, and family investment strategies. Reforms aimed at reducing the emphasis on examination performance or promoting holistic evaluation often conflict with employer preferences for credential-based screening and parental concerns over distributive fairness [13]. Under these conditions, the coordination costs of systemic reform become extraordinarily high, and policy change tends to remain incremental rather than transformative.

### 3.1.4. Adaptive expectations: resistance rooted in anticipatory behavior

Adaptive expectations further reinforce path dependence by shaping how individuals anticipate future policy outcomes based on past experiences [6]. Instead of responding to policy in a fully rational and information-complete manner, individuals

adjust their expectations incrementally according to institutional continuity and previous implementation patterns. When actors perceive a system as durable, they are more likely to behave in ways that perpetuate it.

This mechanism is particularly evident in the implementation of burden-reduction policies in primary and secondary education. Despite repeated efforts to reduce homework and off-campus training, parents often continue to anticipate the long-term persistence of exam-oriented competition. Since educational success remains closely tied to future opportunities, many families view supplementary tutoring as a necessary safeguard against policy uncertainty. Consequently, even when burden reduction is normatively supported and developmentally beneficial, policy outcomes are undermined by anticipatory behavior shaped by historical experience. This highlights that the effectiveness of children's education welfare reform depends not only on formal policy design but also on whether implementing actors genuinely internalize and apply the reform principles. Without such behavioral alignment, policy changes are unlikely to achieve meaningful institutional transformation [5].

### *3.2. A multiple-streams analysis of the driving forces of institutional change*

From the structural perspective of historical institutionalism, institutional change is influenced not only by existing political arrangements but also by the interplay of political, economic, and socio-cultural forces. In the development of China's children's education welfare policy, these forces have periodically converged at pivotal moments, disrupting established patterns and facilitating institutional adjustments.

#### **3.2.1. Political factors: directional leadership and institutional guarantees**

Political factors have provided the principal direction and institutional framework for changes in children's education welfare policy. Most importantly, shifts in governing philosophy have redefined the state's understanding of children, children's rights, and the scope of public responsibility. Broadly speaking, China's policy orientation has undergone four interrelated transitions: from talent cultivation to the protection of children's developmental rights; from state-centered provision to multi-actor collaboration among government, schools, families, and society; from efficiency-oriented expansion to educational equity as a core value; and from centralized control to a more differentiated structure combining central guarantees with local adaptation. These shifts have expanded both the normative foundation and policy relevance of children's education welfare.

Legal institutionalization has further translated political commitments into enforceable policy arrangements. The Compulsory Education Law constituted a critical juncture in this regard. By clarifying rights boundaries, formalizing governmental responsibility, and improving resource allocation, it transformed children's education welfare from a general policy aspiration into a more accountable legal framework. More broadly, this legal turn promoted the modernization of the welfare system toward a rights-based and rule-based model.

International political influences also mattered. In the early socialist period, China drew heavily on external educational ideas, emphasizing the public nature of education, state responsibility, and universal compulsory schooling. After reform and opening up, however, globalization and growing international engagement introduced new educational norms and policy references. In particular, the ratification of international conventions on children's rights accelerated the incorporation of child-rights principles into domestic policy, thereby strengthening the legal and normative basis of children's educational welfare [6].

#### **3.2.2. Economic factors: material foundations and demand transformation**

Economic development has provided the material foundation for institutional changes in children's education welfare. During the planned economy period, limited national wealth constrained the scope and quality of welfare provision. In contrast, sustained economic growth after reform and opening up significantly expanded state

fiscal capacity, enabling greater investment in education. Since the early twenty-first century, increased public expenditure on education has improved school conditions, enhanced per-student funding, and supported the rapid expansion of inclusive preschool education. Economic growth has not only financed policy expansion but also facilitated the upgrading of children's education welfare from basic provision to quality enhancement.

At the same time, economic development has reshaped social demand. As living standards improved, families shifted their focus from mere access to schooling to concerns about educational quality, developmental outcomes, and long-term mobility. Children's educational needs have also become increasingly diversified, extending beyond the acquisition of basic knowledge to include creativity, individuality, and broader capabilities. Consequently, children's education welfare policy has gradually evolved from ensuring minimal educational access to supporting more comprehensive and development-oriented goals [10].

Changes in the economic system and industrial structure have further reinforced this policy transformation [11]. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy, along with industrial upgrading, has generated rising demand for innovative, technically skilled, and adaptable human capital. As a result, children's education welfare policy has increasingly emphasized scientific literacy, information competence, and the cultivation of comprehensive abilities. Additionally, stronger support for vocational and skills-oriented education reflects the need to align educational provision with structural changes in the labor market and to provide children with more diversified developmental pathways.

### 3.2.3. Socio-cultural factors: ideational change and the reorientation of demand

Socio-cultural factors have shaped both the normative legitimacy and the substantive direction of children's education welfare policy. Traditional Chinese culture, with its long-standing emphasis on education, respect for teachers, and the social value of learning, has generated strong and persistent public support for educational investment. This cultural foundation has made children's education a matter of broad social concern and provided enduring legitimacy for state intervention in this field.

More importantly, changes in the social conception of childhood have redefined the goals of policy. In the early decades of the People's Republic, children were largely understood through a society-centered lens, primarily as future contributors to societal development. Accordingly, education policy focused on political socialization, labor preparation, and the provision of basic educational rights, with limited attention to emotional, psychological, and individual development. After reform and opening up, however, under the influence of international frameworks and renewed recognition of child-centered educational thought, this conception gradually shifted toward a child-centered orientation. Children increasingly came to be seen as individuals with distinct interests, capacities, and developmental needs [5].

This ideational shift had far-reaching policy consequences. Educational welfare moved beyond a narrow concern with knowledge transmission toward the cultivation of all-round development, including moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and practical capacities. Since the early twenty-first century, rising public expectations for educational fairness, quality-oriented education, and family education have further pushed policy toward inclusiveness and quality improvement [2]. In the new era, the emphasis on holistic development and moral formation has deepened this trajectory, making children's education welfare more responsive to both developmental rights and broader social expectations.

## 4. Conclusion

A close examination of the evolution of children's education welfare policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China suggests that its transformation has been shaped by the interplay of political institutions, economic development, and socio-

cultural change. The three major stages of this evolution—initial exploration under the planned economy, institutional adjustment during the market reform era, and integrated innovation in the new era—demonstrate both the continuity of policy development under conditions of path dependence and the possibility of institutional reconfiguration at critical junctures. Over more than seven decades, substantial progress has been made in expanding and improving children's education welfare. Nevertheless, persistent challenges, including uneven resource distribution, insufficient policy coordination, and emerging developmental pressures facing children, continue to constrain the realization of equitable and high-quality educational welfare. Drawing on the structural and historical logic of institutional change, this study proposes three policy directions for the next stage of reform.

First, the policy framework should be further consolidated through stronger legal institutionalization. Efforts should focus on refining the legal and regulatory framework for children's education welfare by drawing, where appropriate, on relevant international experience while remaining attentive to domestic institutional realities. A more coherent and stable legal framework would not only strengthen the protection of children's educational rights but also help reduce policy uncertainty and reshape the adaptive expectations of key actors. In particular, greater effort should be directed toward the development of specialized child welfare legislation that explicitly recognizes the right to education as a fundamental right and clearly defines governmental responsibilities, coverage boundaries, implementation standards, and accountability mechanisms.

Second, greater investment in educational resources is essential to advancing educational equity. In light of persistent disparities between urban and rural areas and across regions, public spending should be directed more effectively toward rural, remote, and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Such efforts should aim not only to equalize formal access to education but also to improve the substantive quality of educational provision. At the same time, children with special needs require more targeted and differentiated support. Strengthening specialized services, inclusive provision, and professional guidance is therefore necessary to ensure that all children can access fair and high-quality educational opportunities.

Third, a more collaborative governance mechanism should be established through broader social participation. Children's education welfare cannot be sustained by the state alone; rather, it requires coordinated engagement among government, schools, families, and wider social actors. A governance model characterized by governmental leadership and multi-actor participation would enhance both policy responsiveness and implementation capacity. In this regard, greater emphasis should be placed on public communication, social awareness, and the cultivation of shared responsibility for children's development. Only by strengthening cross-sector collaboration can long-term, inclusive, and high-quality development of children's education welfare be further promoted.

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