Article

Curriculum Design for Kindergarten Toddler Classes under China's Integrated Childcare and Preschool Education Model: Theoretical Foundations and Implementation Pathways

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Abstract: China is expanding childcare for children under three at remarkable speed, and opening toddler classes in kindergartens has become a central strategy under the integrated childcare and preschool education model. Most kindergartens, however, have no curriculum built for two- to three-year-olds, and simply pushing the preschool curriculum downward risks placing academic pressure on very young children. This study asks what theoretical principles should anchor curriculum design for kindergarten toddler classes, how these principles can be organized into an operational framework, and what conditions implementation requires. Drawing on an analysis of national policy documents issued between 2019 and 2025 and a structured synthesis of 34 journal studies, we designed an integrated relational curriculum framework. The framework rests on attachment theory, sociocultural theory, the educare tradition, and developmental neuroscience. It organizes provision around four components: secure-base relationships maintained by a key person system, care routines treated as curriculum, responsive play-based learning, and family-kindergarten co-construction, with an observation and assessment cycle running through all four. Implementation pathways cover workforce preparation, transition and continuity, home partnership, and quality assurance. The framework offers kindergartens a workable scaffold for toddler-class provision and a reference for a much needed national curriculum guideline.

Keywords: integrated childcare and preschool education; toddler class; curriculum design; educare; relational pedagogy

1. Introduction

1.1. Policy Momentum Behind Integrated Childcare and Preschool Education

The first three years of life are a period of extraordinary neural and psychological growth. The timing and quality of early experiences shape the architecture of the developing brain, and caregiving relationships are the main channel through which these experiences reach the child [1]. What happens in group care for children under three therefore carries consequences well beyond childcare logistics.

China has moved this age group to the center of its family policy agenda within a very short time. The shift is inseparable from demography. Births fell from 17.86 million in 2016 to 9.02 million in 2023, before a modest recovery to 9.54 million in 2024. Preschool provision is shrinking in step: official statistics count 274,400 kindergartens with 40.93 million enrolled children in 2023, down to 253,300 kindergartens and 35.84 million children in 2024, a single-year loss of more than twenty thousand kindergartens and five million enrollments. Classrooms and teachers are being freed up precisely when the country is trying to build a childcare system almost from scratch.

The construction pace of that system has been fast. The State Council issued its first national guidance on care services for children under three in 2019, and the 14th Five-Year Plan set a target of 4.5 childcare slots per 1,000 people by 2025 [2]. By the end of 2023 the country had 4.77 million slots, or 3.38 per 1,000 people. By the end of 2024, the National

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Health Commission reported 114,000 childcare institutions offering 5.737 million slots (4.08 per 1,000), with 2.626 million children actually enrolled, and by December 2025 the figures had climbed to 126,000 institutions, 6.66 million slots, and 4.73 slots per 1,000, surpassing the five-year target ahead of schedule. Even so, fewer than one in ten Chinese children under three attend formal childcare. By comparison, average enrollment across OECD countries is roughly 29 percent for this age group, and average participation among two-year-olds reaches about 63 percent when registered services are included. The gap is no longer only about supply; it is about whether families trust the quality of what is supplied [3,4].

Within this expansion, the kindergarten-based toddler class has been assigned a leading role. The Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China, adopted in November 2024 and effective from June 1, 2025, explicitly encourages qualified kindergartens to open toddler classes and provide childcare services (Article 84), while its main text prohibits primary-school-style teaching in preschool settings. The 2025 Government Work Report promised to phase in free preschool education and expand inclusive childcare, a national childcare subsidy took effect in July 2025, and a dedicated Childcare Services Law entered legislative review in December 2025. Policy analysts describe this package as a deliberate integration of the historically separated childcare (zero to three) and preschool (three to six) systems, a model known in China as tuoyou yitihua [2,4,5]. Practice is moving just as quickly: by April 2025, Hunan Province alone reported 1,611 kindergartens running 2,271 toddler classes for 29,107 children. The model is also institutionally economical: kindergartens already command pedagogical resources, premises, and parental trust that stand-alone nurseries take years to accumulate [4,6].

1.2. The Curriculum Gap in Kindergarten Toddler Classes

Rapid institutional growth has outpaced pedagogical preparation. China's curricular infrastructure is built around the three-to-six band: the national learning and development guidelines, teacher preparation programs, and quality inspection systems all target preschool classes. Childcare institutions, for their part, follow the 2021 care guidelines issued by the National Health Commission, which emphasize health, safety, and responsive care but say little about curriculum in the educational sense. A kindergarten that opens a toddler class therefore finds itself between two documents, with no nationally recognized curriculum framework for two- to three-year-olds on its own premises [4,7,8].

Two failure modes follow. The first is downward transplantation: teachers recycle the three-to-six curriculum with younger children, diluting content but keeping its group-instruction format, which drifts toward exactly the academic drill that the Preschool Education Law forbids and that developmental evidence warns against [7,9]. The second is custodial reduction: the toddler class becomes a minding room in which care is competently delivered but the educative potential of daily life is left unused, a pattern documented wherever care and education are conceptually split [7,10]. Both failure modes are compounded by workforce realities, since kindergarten teachers trained for older preschoolers report low confidence in infant-toddler development knowledge, responsive interaction, and curriculum design for this age band [9,11].

Recent Chinese scholarship has examined the integration agenda from several angles, including its policy logic [2,4], structural barriers [7,8], teacher competence [9], and children's transition into kindergartens [11]. Curriculum design for the toddler class itself, however, remains thinly theorized, and this is the gap the present study addresses.

1.3. Research Questions and Methods

Three questions guided the study: (1) What theoretical principles should anchor curriculum design for two- to three-year-olds in kindergarten settings? (2) How can these principles be organized into a coherent, operational curriculum framework suited to Chinese kindergartens? (3) What implementation conditions does the framework require in practice?

The study followed a design research logic with three steps. First, we analyzed twelve national policy and regulatory documents issued between 2019 and 2025, the 2019 State Council guiding opinions on childcare for children under three, the childcare institution standards and care guidelines of the National Health Commission, the 14th Five-Year Plan targets, the Preschool Education Law, and 2025 instruments on subsidies and free preschool education, and we extracted from them the structural constraints within which a kindergarten toddler class must operate. Second, we conducted a structured literature synthesis. Google Scholar and CrossRef were searched for journal articles published between 2006 and 2026 using combinations of terms such as infant-toddler curriculum, educare, integrated care and education, relational pedagogy, process quality, toddler classroom, and China childcare policy. Thirty-four studies were retained after screening for relevance and journal quality, sixteen with a Chinese focus and eighteen international. Third, we mapped theory to design through iterative principle-component analysis: each theoretical claim was translated into a design principle, each principle into curriculum components, and the components were checked against the structural requirements identified in step one. The resulting framework is presented in Section 4, and the conditions for its enactment in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Educare Tradition and the Integration of Care and Education

Whether care and education belong together is an old question in early childhood policy, and countries answer it in their institutions. Where services for under-threes sit in welfare systems while preschool sits in education systems, staff tend to conceptualize care and education as competing goods; where integration is institutionalized, the two are more often described as a single practice [12,13]. Van Laere and Vandenbroeck [12] showed that even within a split system, preschool staff in Flanders edged toward an educare position in which caring relationships are seen as a precondition rather than a distraction. Greek educators similarly treated educare as the everyday reality of their work despite policy language that separated the concepts [13].

The concept has critical force as well. Sims and colleagues [14] warn that a neoliberal push-down curriculum standardizes learning for infants and toddlers, and they propose the integration of care and education as the pragmatic counterweight. Australian data show the same tension from the other side: a curriculum framework nominally covering birth to five coexists with educators' persistent belief that education proper starts later, leaving infant-toddler rooms educationally underserved [10]. In the United States, fragmentation of funding and governance for under-threes has long been identified as the core obstacle to coherent birth-to-five provision [15]. The international lesson is consistent: integration is achieved or lost at the level of daily pedagogy, not only at the level of administrative structure.

2.2. Relational Pedagogy and Attachment in Group Care

For children under three, the relationship is the curriculum's main carrier. A meta-analysis of forty studies found that children in group care commonly form secure attachments to nonparental care providers, with security tied to the provider's sensitive and responsive behavior [16]. This finding grounds a now considerable literature on relationship-based practice. Observational and intervention work describes how caregivers who read infant cues, respond contingently, and sustain individualized relationships turn feeding, diapering, and comforting into developmental opportunities [17,18]. Recchia and colleagues [19] followed preservice caregivers learning to love the babies in their care and showed that such emotional engagement can be deliberately cultivated rather than assumed. Primary caregiving structures, in which each child is assigned to one consistent caregiver, provide the organizational form for this pedagogy, and preservice preparation built around primary caregiving measurably improves students' infant-care competence [20].

Relational pedagogy is not only about warmth. Hedges and Cooper [21] theorize play itself as relational, arguing that infants' and toddlers' interests become curriculum content through reciprocal engagement between child and teacher. A recent review of theory informing infant-toddler pedagogy reaches a complementary conclusion: developmental, attachment, and sociocultural perspectives converge on the primacy of responsive relationships within play-based environments [22]. For curriculum design, the implication is that relational quality is a structural feature to be engineered through grouping, staffing, and scheduling decisions, not a personal gift that some teachers happen to possess.

2.3. Process Quality in Toddler Classrooms

Process quality, the quality of moment-to-moment interaction, is where curriculum either happens or does not. A four-country observational study of toddler classrooms found overall quality in the low-to-mid range, with emotional support generally stronger than cognitive and language support, and with group size and ratios among the few structural features that reliably predicted interaction quality [23]. German data echo the pattern: provision for under-threes scores markedly lower on global quality measures than preschool classrooms, and mixed-age grouping does not by itself rescue interaction quality [24]. In Portugal, higher ratios and smaller groups were associated with better global process quality in infant rooms, although the associations were modest and dependent on caregiver training [25].

The stakes are long-term. A longitudinal meta-analysis estimated that process quality in early childhood settings predicts later academic outcomes with small but durable effects [26], and toddler-specific work links the quality of teacher-child interaction to children's emerging self-regulation [27]. Chinese evidence has begun to appear. Observations of toddler classrooms report wide variation in interaction quality, with emotional support outpacing instructional support and with quality unevenly distributed across institutions [28]; a profile analysis of eighty-one toddler classrooms in Hunan Province likewise distinguished quality profiles and linked them to structural conditions [29]. The Chinese toddler classroom, in short, already exhibits the international signature: warm caregiving is common, intentional educative interaction is not.

2.4. Chinese Research on Curriculum and Integration

Two streams of Chinese research inform the design task. The first concerns preschool curriculum reform for the three-to-six band. Play-based curriculum reform over the past two decades has shifted kindergartens away from whole-class instruction toward play and project work, with documented gains in the quality of play practices even in rural settings [30,31]. Preschool process quality, in turn, predicts Chinese children's developmental outcomes [32]. This stream shows that curriculum reform can change practice at scale in China, but its evidence base stops at age three.

The second stream concerns the under-three system itself. Studies have traced the historical contraction and recent reconstruction of childcare policy [4,33], the governance logic of the current expansion [2], and parents' service preferences, which combine desires for professional care, developmental support, and affordability [3]. A systematic review of ECEC integration identifies mismatched curricula and unprepared educators as core barriers, and recommends aligning educator preparation with integrated practice [7]; a companion analysis of China's reform argues that the longstanding administrative division between education and health authorities has produced fragmented curriculum and teacher development, now requiring deliberate reconstruction [8]. Evaluations of integrated service models are beginning to emerge, such as a program joining education, care, and medicine that improved parents' knowledge of parenting strategies [34]. What is missing between these streams is a curriculum architecture for the kindergarten toddler class, the institutional form through which integration is now being delivered.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Attachment Theory and the Key Person Approach

Attachment theory supplies the framework's first premise: for a two-year-old, a reliable relationship with a familiar adult is not an enrichment but the precondition for exploration. Children in group care form attachments to their caregivers, and the security of these bonds tracks the caregiver's sensitive responsiveness [16]. Two design consequences follow. Continuity matters, because attachment forms through repeated, predictable interaction with a specific person, so the toddler class needs a key person system in which each child is greeted, fed, changed, and comforted mainly by one known adult within a small home group [17,20]. Emotional availability also matters as a professional competence that can be taught, supervised, and evaluated, rather than a personality trait left to chance [19]. Where ratios are high and staffing rotates, these conditions collapse, which is why attachment logic must shape structure before it shapes activities.

3.2. Sociocultural Theory and Play-Based Learning

Sociocultural theory supplies the second premise: toddlers learn through joint activity with more experienced partners, and learning runs ahead of development when adults work within the child's zone of proximal development. For this age band, the joint activity in question is overwhelmingly play and daily routine, not instruction. Relational play-based pedagogy describes how teachers convert a child's displayed interest into shared activity and, from there, into new competence [21]. The Chinese kindergarten field has already absorbed this lesson for older preschoolers through two decades of play-oriented curriculum reform, which improved play practice even in rural kindergartens [30,31]. The toddler class should inherit the reform's achievement rather than the pre-reform habits of demonstration and drill. Teachers in the toddler class therefore act as play partners and environment designers first and as instructors only in brief, embedded moments, a stance consistent with theoretical accounts of infant-toddler pedagogy in which intentionality operates through relationships and environments rather than lesson plans [22].

3.3. The Educare Paradigm: Care as Curriculum

The third premise comes from the educare tradition: for under-threes, care and education are one act, not two. Feeding, toileting, dressing, and settling to sleep occupy the majority of a toddler's day in group care, and each of these episodes is simultaneously a caregiving task and a dense learning situation involving language, motor skills, self-regulation, and trust [12,13]. Treating such episodes as interruptions to education produces the custodial failure mode; treating them as the curriculum's main text produces educare [14]. Australian experience shows the cost of ambiguity on this point: when educators quietly believe that education starts at three, infant-toddler rooms receive less pedagogical attention even under a unified national framework [10]. A toddler-class curriculum must therefore name care routines as first-class curriculum content and equip teachers to exploit them deliberately.

3.4. Developmental Neuroscience of the First Three Years

The fourth premise is biological. Brain development in the first years is experience-expectant and experience-dependent, and its pace makes the zero-to-three window uniquely consequential and uniquely sensitive to stress [1]. Two implications matter for design. The curriculum should be sensorimotor in character, rich in movement, touch, sound, and outdoor experience, because this is the register in which two-year-olds take in the world. Equally important, the curriculum should protect children from chronic stress, since the physiology that drives learning is degraded by insecurity, crowding, and unpredictable care; this returns design attention once again to ratios, group size, and the stability of the key person relationship [16,25].

4. The Integrated Curriculum Design

The resulting design, which we call the Integrated Relational Toddler Curriculum, is easiest to picture as a set of nested layers. At the innermost core sits the child, twenty-four

to thirty-six months old, held together with the key person as a single unit, because every curriculum experience at this age is mediated by that secure-base relationship. Around this core run the two great streams of a toddler's day. One stream is care routines, namely meals, toileting, nap, and arrival and departure; the other is responsive play-based learning, namely free play, sensory and art play, and outdoor play. The design treats the two streams as equally weighted carriers of curriculum content, and both reach the child through the key person relationship, which is in turn reshaped by the child's responses. Enclosing the two streams are the five developmental domains (health, language, social, science, and art), which give teachers a shared language for goals and observation. Two pillars flank this whole arrangement: family-kindergarten co-construction on one side, and the observation-documentation-assessment cycle on the other. An outer wrap of structural conditions, including ratios and group size, environment, staffing, and teacher competence, holds everything in place. The subsections that follow unpack the design from principles to daily operation.

4.1. Design Principles

The four theoretical premises, checked against the policy constraints and the empirical quality literature, condense into five design principles (Table 1). Relationship first requires that every structural decision, from group size to shift scheduling, protect the key person bond [16,20]. Routines as curriculum assigns pedagogical intention to care episodes [12,17]. Play as medium makes self-initiated play the default activity state and limits group-structured time to a few minutes [21,30]. Individual pacing replaces age-band uniformity with observation-driven planning, because two-year-olds vary enormously in language, mobility, and self-help skills [22,27]. Family alignment treats parents as co-designers of the child's experience, reflecting both Chinese parents' strong developmental expectations [3] and the dependence of toddlers on consistency across settings [34].

Table 1. Design Principles of the Integrated Toddler-Class Curriculum

Principle	Theoretical and empirical anchor	Classroom translation
Relationship first	Attachment security in group care [16]; primary caregiving preparation [20]	Key person system; home groups of five to six children per key teacher; continuity across the year
Routines as curriculum	Educare and care-education unity [12,14]; relationship-based care practice [17,18]	Feeding, toileting, dressing, and napping planned as educative episodes with language and self-help goals
Play as medium	Relational play-based pedagogy [21]; Chinese play-based reform evidence [30,31]	Free play in prepared learning corners as the default; teacher joins and extends play; group time under ten minutes
Individual pacing	Observation-based infant-toddler pedagogy [22]; interaction quality and self-regulation links [27]	Weekly observation notes per child drive next week's provisions; no uniform skill targets by month
Family alignment	Chinese parents' developmental expectations [3]; integrated family services [34]	Daily two-way feedback; gradual entry schedule; parenting guidance built into class routines

4.2. Goals and Content Structure

The framework keeps the five-domain architecture familiar to Chinese kindergarten teachers (health, language, social, science, and art) but rewrites each domain for the developmental tasks of twenty-four to thirty-six months (Table 2). Health becomes secure attachment, movement confidence, and self-help skills; language becomes comprehension, early words, and joint attention; the social domain becomes parallel play, peer awareness,

and emotional security; science becomes sensory exploration, object permanence, and early problem solving; art becomes rhythm, sound, and mark making. Content is delivered almost entirely through routine episodes and play contexts rather than through themed lessons, because at this age the episode, not the topic, is the natural unit of curriculum [12,17]. Each domain is paired with observation indicators so that teachers can document progress without testing toddlers [22].

Table 2. Content Structure of the Toddler-Class Curriculum (24-36 Months)

Domain	Developmental focus	Main routine carriers	Typical play contexts	Observation indicators
Health and movement	Secure attachment; gross motor confidence; self-feeding and dressing	Meals, toileting, nap, arrival and departure	Outdoor climbing and pushing, sand and water play	Feeds self with spoon; walks stairs with rail; separates from parent with support
Language and communication	Comprehension; first phrases; joint attention	Naming and talking through every care episode	Picture-book sharing, song and finger play, pretend talk	Follows one-step instructions; uses two-word phrases; points to share interest
Social and emotional	Emotional security; peer awareness; early regulation	Greeting rituals, comfort episodes, transitions	Parallel play beside peers, simple turn-taking games	Seeks key person when upset; plays alongside peers; recovers from upset with help
Exploration and cognition	Sensory discrimination; object permanence; early problem solving	Snack preparation, tidying up, water play	Sorting and posting, nesting cups, cause-and-effect toys	Searches for hidden objects; matches shapes; persists with a simple problem
Aesthetic experience	Rhythm, sound, color, movement	Music at transitions, hand-washing songs	Mark making, movement to music, messy play	Moves to rhythm; explores paint and crayons; joins familiar songs

4.3. The Daily Schedule: Routines as Curriculum

A full-day schedule illustrates how principles become a day (Table 3). Two features carry the design logic. Structured group moments are few and short, never exceeding ten minutes, and they are built from songs, rhymes, and picture books rather than from teaching objectives read aloud. Care episodes are scheduled generously, unhurried enough for conversation and practice of self-help skills, because it is inside these episodes that most of the day's curriculum actually happens [17,18]. The schedule alternates active and quiet periods in short blocks, respecting the attention span and physiological rhythm of two-year-olds [1].

Table 3. Reference Daily Schedule for a Full-Day Toddler Class

Time	Segment	Curriculum nature	Pedagogical focus
7:40-8:20	Arrival, health check, breakfast	Care routine	Key person greeting; gradual separation; self-feeding
8:20-9:10	Indoor free play in learning corners	Play	Teacher joins and extends child-initiated play

9:10-9:30	Outdoor gross motor play	Play	Climbing, pushing, throwing; safety negotiation
9:30-9:50	Toileting, hand washing, snack	Care routine	Self-help practice; hygiene language
9:50-10:00	Morning circle: songs and rhymes	Structured moment	Joint attention; rhythm and sound
10:00-10:40	Sensory and art play	Play	Mark making, water and sand, messy exploration
10:40-11:20	Lunch	Care routine	Self-feeding; table language; trying new foods
11:20-11:40	Toileting, settling for nap	Care routine	Comfort rituals; transition to rest
11:40-14:00	Nap	Care routine	Individual sleep needs; quiet supervision
14:00-14:40	Wake-up, dressing, afternoon snack	Care routine	Dressing practice; sequencing skills
14:40-15:30	Outdoor play or neighborhood walk	Play	Nature contact; vocabulary in context
15:30-15:40	Story and music moment	Structured moment	Picture-book sharing; familiar songs
15:40-16:10	Tidy-up and departure	Care routine	Sorting materials; reunion talk with parents

4.4. Environment, Grouping, and Staffing

The physical and organizational environment is designed as part of the curriculum, not as its container. Rooms should read as domestic rather than institutional, with soft defined spaces, low open shelves, and materials within children's reach, because two-year-olds regulate themselves better in small, legible spaces [24,25]. Group size should stay at or below fifteen children with at least two teachers and one childcare worker, tighter than the national ceiling of twenty children for this age band, since ratio and group size are among the few structural variables with demonstrated links to interaction quality [23,25]. The key person system assigns each child to one teacher within a home group of five or six, while staff scheduling protects continuity by keeping home groups stable across the week and the school year [20]. An observation wall and a simple documentation station inside the classroom let teachers record notes in the flow of the day rather than after hours.

4.5. Observation, Documentation, and Assessment

Assessment in the toddler class is observational and formative. Teachers keep brief weekly narrative notes for each child organized by the five domains, drawing on the learning story tradition in which documentation describes what a child is doing and becoming rather than scoring what a child lacks [21,22]. These notes feed a simple planning loop: observe, interpret, adjust provisions and interactions, and observe again. Once per semester, teachers consolidate the notes into a developmental summary that goes to parents and, at transition, to the receiving preschool class [11]; standardized testing has no place here, in keeping with the law's prohibition of academic instruction. For program-level self-evaluation, adapted versions of toddler-appropriate instruments such as the CLASS Toddler or the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale can be used twice a year as mirrors for practice, on the understanding that Chinese toddler classrooms typically need the most growth in language and cognitive support rather than in warmth [28,29].

5. Implementation Pathways

5.1. Building a Dual-Competent Workforce

The framework's first implementation condition is personnel who combine preschool teaching competence with infant-toddler care knowledge. Chinese early childhood teachers working in integrated settings report precisely this competence gap, particularly in developmental knowledge for under-threes, responsive interaction, and curriculum design for care routines [9]. Three responses are practical at the kindergarten level. Preservice and in-service preparation should treat primary caregiving, responsive communication, and routine-based pedagogy as teachable skills, an approach with demonstrated success in teacher education [20]. Classrooms should pair a preschool-trained teacher with a qualified childcare worker so that both professional traditions are present in the room. And because the emotional labor of toddler work is heavy, kindergartens should protect planning time and collegial reflection for toddler-class staff, the conditions under which caring pedagogy is sustained rather than proclaimed [18,19].

5.2. Managing Entry Transition and Upward Continuity

Two transitions frame the toddler-class year. At entry, a gradual admission schedule spreads over one to two weeks: parents are present at first, and the key person takes over comforting duties in stages, protecting attachment security during the child's first separation from family [11,16]. At exit, continuity with the preschool class is secured through documentation handover, joint activities with the receiving class in the final term, and aligned expectations about self-help skills. Chinese research on toddlers entering kindergartens traditionally serving three- to six-year-olds documents the difficulties of exactly this passage and recommends precisely these bridging practices [11]. Continuity also has a curricular meaning: the five-domain structure of the toddler class deliberately anticipates the domain language of the preschool guidelines, so that children move within a coherent developmental narrative instead of jumping between unrelated systems.

5.3. Deepening the Home-Kindergarten Partnership

Parents of under-threes in China want professional care that is safe, developmental, and affordable, and their enrollment decisions follow visible quality [3]. The framework answers with daily two-way feedback at pickup, shared observation notes, and periodic parenting guidance woven into ordinary contact rather than delivered as lectures. Evidence from an integrated education-care-medicine program shows that such structured engagement measurably improves parents' knowledge of parenting strategies [34]. Partnership also has a curriculum function: consistent feeding, toileting, and sleep practices across home and kindergarten stabilize the toddler's day, and teachers learn from parents the small facts (a new word, a fear, a favorite song) around which responsive teaching is built [17].

5.4. Establishing Quality Assurance

Because no national curriculum guideline yet exists for the toddler class, quality assurance must be constructed locally and deliberately. Kindergartens can combine three instruments: regular observation-based review of interaction quality using toddler-appropriate tools [23,28]; peer observation and mentoring that focus on the known weak spots of Chinese toddler classrooms, namely language and cognitive support [28,29]; and documentation audits that check whether observation notes actually drive planning. At the governance level, the toddler class answers to both education and health authorities, so internal standards should satisfy both regulatory traditions, a duality that the forthcoming Childcare Services Law is expected to formalize [2,5]. Kindergartens that document their curriculum framework, staffing model, and assessment cycle are, in effect, preparing themselves for accreditation under the emerging national quality regime.

6. Discussion

6.1. How the Framework Advances Existing Work

Existing integration research tells kindergartens why they should absorb toddler classes and what competes with success, but it stops short of telling teachers what to do on Monday morning [7,8,9]. The present framework converts the accumulated evidence

(attachment science, educare, relational pedagogy, and process-quality research) into an operable daily structure with defined components, schedules, and assessment practices. It also localizes the international evidence. Rather than importing a foreign curriculum wholesale, it keeps the five-domain architecture and the play-based reform achievements of Chinese preschool education [30,31] while re-centering them on the developmental register of two-year-olds, thereby lowering the adoption cost for the workforce that must enact it.

6.2. Practical Implications

For kindergartens, the framework supplies a starting scaffold that can be adapted to local conditions: its four components specify what must be engineered, and its tables specify what teachers plan, observe, and record. For teacher educators, the framework identifies the competence modules that toddler-class preparation must add, including responsive interaction, routine-based pedagogy, and observation-driven planning [9,20]. For policymakers, the analysis suggests that a national curriculum guideline for kindergarten toddler classes is the missing instrument between the care standards of the health system and the learning guidelines of the education system, and that the framework's principle-component structure offers a candidate architecture for such a guideline [4,8].

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study is a design study, and its product awaits empirical trial. Three limitations qualify the claims. The framework has not yet been implemented and evaluated in operating toddler classes, so its effects on children, teachers, and parents remain to be demonstrated; design-based implementation research with pre-registered outcome measures is the obvious next step. The literature synthesis was limited to journal articles in English, which underrepresents Chinese-language scholarship on childcare practice. Regional diversity in resources and workforce means that rural and lower-capacity kindergartens may need simplified versions of some components, a hypothesis to be tested rather than assumed. Finally, the quality instruments referenced were developed in Western contexts, and although Chinese validation work is accumulating [28,29], their routine use in Chinese toddler classes deserves further psychometric attention.

7. Conclusion

China's integrated childcare and preschool education model has created, almost overnight, a new educational institution: the kindergarten toddler class. Policy has supplied the classrooms, the children, and the legal mandate; what it has not yet supplied is a curriculum. This study designed one. Grounded in attachment theory, sociocultural theory, the educare tradition, and developmental neuroscience, the proposed framework organizes the toddler class around secure-base relationships, care routines as curriculum, responsive play-based learning, and family-kindergarten co-construction, with observation and assessment cycling through all four. Its five design principles, five-domain content structure, and reference daily schedule translate evidence into a form teachers can use, and its implementation pathways address workforce, transition, partnership, and quality assurance. As toddler classes multiply across Chinese kindergartens, the difference between a minding room and an educative environment will be decided by curricular choices. The framework offered here is meant to help kindergartens make those choices deliberately, and to give the coming national guideline a tested point of departure.

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