

Reform of the Evaluation System and Mechanism for Rural - friendly Preschool Education: A Literature Review of 10 Years

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Abstract: About the reform of preschool education evaluation system and mechanism, the past ten years is a key stage of adjusting to the direction of rural friendly and actively exploring and practicing. The construction of a rural friendly preschool education evaluation system and mechanism is a key link to fill the shortcomings of China's education, promote education equity, and help rural revitalization. It is very important and practical to review the literature on this topic in the past ten years (about 2014-2024). This review will sort out and analyze the background and motivation of the reform, the existing practical experience and trend, the realistic implementation difficulties, and the future prospects.

1. Introduction

Rural preschool education is the "nerve end" in a country's education system, and it is also one of the weakest links. The core of constructing the "rural friendly" evaluation system is to abandon the single evaluation standard based on the city as a template, and establish an evaluation system that truly respects the rural reality, conforms to the law of children's development, and can promote the endogenous development of rural preschool education [1].

2. Background and Motivation of the Reform: Why Reform?

In the past decade, China's rural preschool education has achieved unprecedented rapid development under the promotion of the two national strategies of "poverty alleviation" and "rural revitalization" [2]. However, the traditional evaluation system of preschool education based on the city is seriously out of step with the unique natural, social and cultural environment of the countryside, leading to the problem of serious fragmentation [3].

Therefore, it directly raises questions about whether the evaluation system of preschool education can play its due structural role and whether it can effectively serve and promote the better development of rural preschool education [4] [5]. In summary, the primary motivations behind the public's call for reform include the following: Firstly, there has been an intensification of the "primary - school - like" tendency in rural preschool education. This is manifested in the misguided

evaluation criteria centered around knowledge and skills. To "meet the standards", some rural kindergartens adopt rote - learning teaching methods, neglecting the cultivation of children's behavioral habits, social development, and local cultural identity [6]. Secondly, the annihilation of the unique value of rural areas. For example, the traditional evaluation system cannot effectively measure the advantages and effectiveness of rural kindergartens in the use of natural resources (mountains, fields, animals and plants), social resources (neighborhood communities) and cultural resources (local folk customs and traditional skills) [7]. In addition, rural parents have a demand for high-quality inclusive kindergartens, because with the promotion of the popularization of preschool education, the focus of rural preschool education has begun to shift from "wide coverage" to "quality assurance". The establishment of a scientific and appropriate evaluation mechanism has become the key to promote the connotation development of rural preschool education [8]. Last, there is a profound call for educational equity. The reform of the evaluation mechanism is an important step to ensure that rural children not only have access to schools but also receive high-quality education, enabling them to enjoy fair and high-standard education [9].

3. Practical Experience, Beneficial Experiments and Trends

In the past ten years, China's central government and local government have paid increasing attention to rural preschool education, and some valuable practical experience and useful exploration have been accumulated.

The first is the transformation of policy orientation, such as the national documents such as "Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform and Standardized Development of Preschool Education", which emphasize "universal benefit" and "fairness" and guide preschool education resources to favor rural areas [10]. The evaluation level also began to pay attention to the bottom line indicators such as "gross enrollment rate" and "inclusive kindergarten coverage rate", which provided a basic guarantee for rural preschool education.

Secondly, there was also an attempt at the "subsidy in the form of rewards" model. For instance, in some regions, the educational evaluation results were linked to local financial subsidies. Rural kindergartens that improved their operation norms and educational quality were rewarded, which stimulated the enthusiasm of the grassroots for the development of preschool education. It also includes the introduction of process-based evaluation. Some educational researchers and supervisors who have entered rural areas have begun to focus on observing children's behaviors in games and daily life, rather than merely checking rigid and superficial indicators such as lesson plans and wall decorations [11]. This is more in line with the essence of preschool education and is also more suitable for rural kindergartens with relatively simple facilities.

In addition, there is an increasing emphasis on the exploration and evaluation of local-oriented courses in rural areas. Some forward-thinking rural kindergartens have begun to utilize local resources to develop special courses such as nature-themed education and agricultural experience. The evaluation mechanism has also begun to flexibly recognize this local educational wisdom, treating it as a special bonus item rather than simply comparing it with the high-tech educational facilities in cities [10].

Reviewing the positive measures taken in the reform of the evaluation and management system for rural preschool education over the past decade, we can observe some encouraging development trends. These trends exhibit a clear evolution path from being single to diverse, from being external to internal, and from being standardized to being appropriate. The first point is that the evaluation concept has gradually shifted from a "city-centered" approach to a "friendly to rural areas" approach. The core idea behind this is that we should recognize and respect the differences between urban and rural areas, and no longer simply apply the so-called high standards of urban kindergartens. Instead,

we should emphasize the suitability and supportiveness of the evaluation criteria for rural areas [11]. This conceptual shift is specifically reflected in the evaluation results, which guide the relevant practitioners to start paying attention to whether kindergartens have fully utilized the natural resources of the countryside [12]; whether they have carried out outdoor exploration, planting and breeding activities [13]; whether they have integrated local cultural resources such as folk songs, stories, and festival customs into the curriculum teaching; and whether they have established close connections with social resources such as parents of the children and rural communities [14].

Secondly, the content of the evaluation has finally shifted from focusing on educational hardware and knowledge to emphasizing the nurturing process and quality of young children. In the early period (around 2014-2017), the main focus of the evaluation of many rural kindergartens still lay in merely emphasizing hard indicators such as hardware facilities, teacher allocation, and enrollment rates. Of course, it is undeniable that these are necessary stages for ensuring basic educational conditions [2] [15]. However, starting from 2018, the core of the evaluation content will increasingly focus on the quality of the education process, including the quality of teacher-child interaction, and whether teachers can give warm, sensitive and effective response and support to children; And the appropriateness of kindergarten curriculum implementation, to evaluate whether the curriculum content is close to rural children's life experience, whether it supports their active exploration and comprehensive development; As well as the quality of children's game activities, it emphasizes the game as the basic activity and evaluates children's initiative, concentration and thinking level in the game. In terms of the effectiveness of home-kindergarten co-education, the evaluation focuses on how kindergartens overcome practical difficulties such as left-behind children and establish effective cooperation and communication mechanisms with guardians [10].

In addition, the identification of the evaluation subject has gradually shifted from the single administrative leading to the joint participation of multiple evaluation subjects. The traditional mode of supervision and inspection by the higher education administrative department is gradually weakened and adjusted because of its strong administrative and mandatory color [16] [17]. The new model is to incorporate multiple evaluation considerations, support the voice of multiple groups, and help to understand the rural preschool in a three-dimensional way. First, self-evaluation should be introduced to encourage kindergartens to establish a kindergarten-based internal quality assessment and improvement mechanism to stimulate endogenous motivation. Second, teachers' reflection is emphasized, and teachers are regarded as participants and reflectors of evaluation, and their professional growth is promoted through observation and recording, case analysis and other ways. Third, parents and communities should participate in the evaluation. Although there are still challenges in the implementation of the promotion process, it is also necessary to consider allowing parents and community representatives to participate in the satisfaction evaluation of the kindergarten in an appropriate way. Fourth, third-party evaluation. For example, in some regions, third parties such as universities and professional research institutions have been introduced to conduct independent, professional and effective diagnostic evaluation [18].

Moreover, the evaluation function has gradually shifted from cold identification and grading to promoting future development and improvement. In the past, the main function of educational evaluation was to focus on grading, rating, accountability and other aspects, which brought great pressure to rural kindergartens, and they may even cheat in order to cope with the evaluation [1]. Nowadays, the mainstream call for the function of educational evaluation increasingly emphasizes the developmental function of evaluation. This requires that the evaluation result is no longer just a judgment, but a basis for diagnosing problems, providing guidance, and allocating resources. For example, after the supervision and assessment, supportive measures such as expert guidance for kindergarten admission and tilted teacher training resources will be provided [6] [10].

To sum up, all the above comments and analysis, the underlying foundation is the combination

of policy guidance and localization practice. In other words, relevant policy documents at the national level need to be designed at the top level, which clearly require "sound quality assessment system" and emphasize classification guidance. Although there is no special and unified evaluation standard for rural kindergarten at the national level, this situation reserves space for the exploration of education evaluation by local education government departments. Based on this, each province can investigate and add additional items or characteristic indexes such as local characteristics and natural resource utilization according to the actual situation of the rural area in the provincial preschool education evaluation standard. Some counties and towns can try to carry out localization exploration, and form flexible and diverse evaluation methods such as one garden, one strategy and local curriculum case appraisal.

4. Practical Implementation Challenges and Feasible Approaches

Although significant progress has been made in rural preschool education reform over the past decade, deep-seated institutional and systemic obstacles still remain. The numerous obstacles currently facing the reform are, to some extent, attributed to some unresolved historical issues that have not been completely resolved. These issues have been repeatedly mentioned in the literature over the past decade, and they represent the pain points and difficulties in the subsequent educational reform, which deserve systematic summarization and exploration.

Firstly, there is the inertia of the urban-centric evaluation approach. For a long time, the overall evaluation criteria have still been subconsciously based on urban kindergartens as a model, emphasizing standardized facilities, large play equipment, and full-time specialized teachers, etc. This set of standards is unattainable for resource-poor rural areas, leading to either rural kindergartens struggling to cope and resorting to deception, or losing confidence due to failing to meet the standards [16]. The second is the stubborn and latent influence of the tendency towards primary schoolification. Rural parents generally have an urgent mindset regarding the utilitarian aspect of education. Coupled with the limited professional level of the teaching staff, the phenomenon of teaching primary school subjects earlier is more severe in rural areas. If the original evaluation system fails to supervise this properly, it will instead inadvertently encourage such behavior that goes against the growth laws of young children [19].

Another issue is the insufficient financial investment and the weak material foundation. Rural kindergartens have significant gaps in terms of hardware facilities, teacher allocation (in terms of quantity, quality, and stability), and per-student funding. Moreover, the strength of professional support is extremely weak. The professional research and teaching capabilities in rural preschool education are already a weakness, and the expert teams that can deeply penetrate rural areas, understand rural conditions, and provide precise diagnosis and development guidance for rural kindergartens are seriously lacking [20]. If an evaluation system ignores these objective constraints, it will be tantamount to pushing rural kindergartens further into a marginalized position. Moreover, the incentive mechanism does not match the current situation. The current allocation of research resources, the assessment of teachers' qualifications, etc., still align with the traditional evaluation model and fail to effectively motivate kindergartens to engage in the time-consuming and labor-intensive process of localizing and improving the quality [11]. In some areas, the relevant government departments still have chaotic management systems [21]. If the public kindergartens and private kindergartens have different management affiliations, they may face multiple, repetitive and even inconsistent evaluations from the education department, township government, village committee, etc., which would burden the kindergartens beyond their capacity.

It is worth noting that many researchers have, from various perspectives, put forward many valuable suggestions for the aforementioned issues regarding educational evaluation reform. By

reviewing and summarizing the evaluation reforms in rural preschool education over the past decade, and by synthesizing the research conclusions from all sides, in the future, when implementing the specific practices of promoting the reform of the evaluation system and mechanism, efforts can be concentrated on the following five paths to overcome the current challenges. The first path involves addressing the dilemma in establishing evaluation standards, by constructing a multi-level evaluation system of "national standards - local guidelines - garden-based implementation". The primary task is to consider and resolve how to balance the "national standards" of kindergartens with their "local characteristics". It is necessary to adhere to the bottom lines of safety and quality, while also allowing and encouraging rural kindergartens to explore a path suitable for themselves. This delicate balance requires careful handling [18]. The second approach is to enhance professional support and capacity building. The number of county-level supervisors and educational researchers is limited, and their professional levels vary greatly. They themselves may also be deeply influenced by traditional evaluation concepts. Therefore, it is necessary to consider implementing a training program for rural preschool education quality assessment specialists. This program aims to cultivate local experts who are deeply rooted in the front-line. Even in collaboration with university and other professional research personnel, a completely new and developmental evaluation system can be effectively guided and implemented [14]. The third path is to address the core weakness of the rural preschool teacher workforce. Rural preschool teachers often face low salaries, high job mobility, and limited opportunities for professional development. However, any evaluation reform ultimately needs to be implemented by these teachers; otherwise, even the best evaluation design would be just empty talk [11]. The fourth approach is to seek the participation of rural parents and the community. The ideal rural-friendly evaluation emphasizes joint parenting and community integration. However, how to effectively include parents with relatively low educational levels and those busy with their livelihoods in the evaluation process, and how to ensure that community resources are truly utilized for education, is not only a serious challenge but also an inevitable topic for the deepening of the evaluation reform [10]. The fifth path involves deepening the "evaluation-driven construction" incentive mechanism and properly handling the sensitivity and complexity of the application of evaluation results. The criteria for evaluating the results are directly related to the vital interests of the relevant staff in kindergartens and need to be handled with caution; otherwise, it is likely to trigger new forms of formalism and anxiety, deviating from the original intention of the evaluation reform. The results of developmental evaluation should be directly linked to supportive resources such as special funds subsidies, teacher training quotas, and the promotion of outstanding cases. In terms of the teacher evaluation system, the achievements of teachers in the development of local courses and in home-school cooperation should be regarded as important assessment contents [11].

5. Future Perspectives

The researchers in the existing literature generally agree that the reform of the evaluation and management system for rural-friendly preschool education is a profound revolution in educational concepts. It requires us to shift from using a single standard to evaluate all kindergartens to providing suitable growth environments for each rural kindergarten. Although this deep reform of rural preschool education faces numerous challenges, it has also led many people to pay attention to the huge potential that has yet to be fully exploited in the future development of rural education.

In the future, rural preschool education can leverage the potential support and empowerment of smart education to break through geographical limitations [22]. By utilizing information technology, it can establish online resource platforms and guidance communities to achieve the sharing of high-quality and professional wisdom. Based on this, a regional preschool education quality database can

be established to conduct dynamic analysis of data and implement precise policies [23]. Of course, it should be noted here that we cannot simply implement technology just for the sake of it. Instead, we should make good use of educational technology tools without adding extra burdens to rural kindergartens. The goal should be to reduce the workload and enhance efficiency, making the evaluation more scientific and more humane [24].

6. Conclusions

In the past ten years, the reform of the evaluation system and mechanism of rural friendly preschool education has gone through a road of awakening and exploration from ignoring the countryside to discovering the countryside, from external pressure to endogenous development. The core spirit lies in respecting differences and supporting development. Future reforms need to continue to exert efforts in breaking inertia, strengthening professionalism, and innovating mechanisms, ultimately establishing a scientific evaluation system that can truly awaken the inherent vitality of rural education and ensure that every rural child can enjoy a fair and quality childhood. Ultimately, the hallmark of a successful ideal rural-friendly preschool evaluation system is not the number of "standard kindergartens" that have been established, but rather that every rural kindergarten can find its own pace and brilliance, and that every child can have a good start in their development in their familiar environment.

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