

The Development History, Present and Future of Kindergarten Play Curriculum in China

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Abstract

Play has always been a topic worthy of in-depth discussion in the field of pedagogical research because it promotes the development of children's language, creative learning, physical health, social-emotional and cognitive skills. Since China's first kindergarten was established in 1903, early childhood education has been continuously improved and valued through social changes. In the 21st century, the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial) and the Guidelines for Pre-school Education (GPE) issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2001 emphasise the integration of play and learning, and the development of child-centred play and learning curricula. This paper systematically explores the definition and importance of kindergarten play-based curriculum in China, its development history, current research status, challenges and future directions by combining nearly 40 literatures. At the same time, it investigates kindergarten play curricula in different countries, revealing the similarities and differences of play curricula in different educational philosophies and cultural contexts. The aim of this paper is to promote social awareness of kindergarten play curricula and to promote child-centred education, so as to achieve the purpose of helping children grow and learn healthily in joyful play. And hoped to provide reference for the future policies and reforms related to early childhood education.

Keywords: Play Curriculum, Development, Early Childhood Education, Kindergarten, Children, China.

Introduction

Under the background of globalisation and multiculturalism, the importance of early childhood education has become more and more prominent. In kindergarten education, the voluntary and flexible play-based curriculum has become one of the ways to promote children's development and stimulate their learning (Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020; Fleeer et al., 2020). Especially in the context of early childhood education with decades of accumulated experience, play has been recognised worldwide as a medium of learning for young children (Ata & Macun, 2021). The necessity of research on kindergarten play curriculum lies in the fact that play is the core of early childhood development, and educational practices can be

optimised through research on play curriculum. And understanding the development and present of play curricula can provide a scientific basis for policy makers, thus promoting the improvement and completion of early childhood education policies and improving the quality of education. In terms of the future development of play curricula in Chinese kindergartens, this study will maintain a scientific attitude and provide optimised recommendations that are most suitable for the current educational situation in China.

Currently, the development of kindergarten play curriculum in China has been influenced by educational reforms and policy guidance. And through the formulation of specific policies and implementation strategies, it is committed to designing and implementing play curriculum that meet the developmental needs of young children, which not only enhances their comprehensive abilities, but also promotes their overall development. The Chinese government has also emphasised the importance of play in the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial) (promulgated in 2001) and its revised version, which clearly states that play is an important part of the kindergarten curriculum. The policy states that kindergartens should promote the all-round development of young children through rich and varied play activities, and requires teachers to play an active guiding role in play and ensure that play activities have clear educational objectives (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). In recent years, the Chinese government has also strengthened the regulation and evaluation of kindergarten play curriculum with the aim of improving the quality and equity of education. Niu (2023), stated that in the new kindergarten work regulations, play curriculum are explicitly substituted for traditional small group teaching as the main educational activity in kindergartens. The purpose of this article is to help parents, government officials, and educators better understand the significance of play curriculum the current status of play curriculum in China, and the direction of future development, so as to stimulate innovation and reform of kindergarten education and to provide better educational services for young children. And this article helps to call attention to the kindergarten play programme, raise society's concern for early childhood education, and prompt more resources and support to be invested in early childhood education, thus promoting the development and improvement of the entire education system.

The Definition and Importance of Kindergarten Play Curriculum

The cultural-historical concept of play originates from Vygotsky's theory that children create imaginary situations in play, and Vygotsky defined play as the most appropriate and desirable activity for children (Ata & Macun, 2021; Li, 2024). In play, educational experts believe that children can change the meaning of objects through their imagination, thus creating or imitating something new from their previous experiences and social reality (Li, 2024). In addition, Rodriguez-Meehan (2022), stated that definitions of play are often culturally and environmentally based, and that psychologists, biologists, educators, and sociologists tend to describe play through its contribution to a child's growth and development, creativity, emotions, social skills, and learning. The greatest benefit of integrating play with the learning curriculum is the ability to effectively take into account children's desires, individualism and development (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2022). Therefore, in order to draw the world's attention to children's play, the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (cited 1989) emphasises play as a fundamental right of the child and as one of the ways in which children acquire essential skills and knowledge (Niland, 2023). Guarrella, Driel and Cohrsen (2022), and Fung and Chung (2023), mentioned that play is seen as a core activity in education where

children can explore the world around them, and develop key cognitive and social skills. Moreover, children transform themselves into active participants in learning through play, acquiring new knowledge by interacting with others and by experiencing and exploring objects in culturally meaningful environments (Whitlock, Eivers & Walker, 2023). Furthermore, Whitlock, Eivers and Walker (2023), indicated that through play, young children are able to develop key learning skills in a relaxed and enjoyable environment, and this approach has been shown to be effective. Therefore, Chinese kindergartens, which favoured traditional curriculum teaching, released the Guidelines for Pre-school Education (GPE) (Trial) in 2001 in order to adapt to globalised educational concepts and began a gradual transition from the traditional teacher-centred teaching model to a child-centred, play-based teaching approach (Niu, 2023).

Niu (2023), stated that the play curriculum, as a new direction of kindergarten reform, does not replace the original traditional curriculum in its entirety, but to modifies and expands on the original foundation to make the boring traditional curriculum more life-like and practical. In addition, the traditional kindergarten curriculum in the past was a completely teacher-centred teaching model, making it difficult for teachers to ensure that every child's learning and cognition can be developed. In contrast, in a child-centred play curriculum, the teacher is the 'facilitator' and 'supporter' of learning, thus better prompting the holistic development of all childrens (Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020). A number of studies have shown that teachers are not only observers during play, but also need to intervene at appropriate times to guide and extend children's play experiences (Whitlock, Eivers & Walker, 2023; Chen, Rouse & Morrissey, 2023; Cheung, Keung & Tam, 2022; Li, Jiang & Deng, 2023). Jiang & Deng, 2023). This guided approach to teaching and learning can help children to gain more meaningful ideas, as well as achievements in practice, and can provide a foundation for future learning (Whitlock, Eivers & Walker, 2023). In addition, teachers help children to achieve their learning goals through play by providing adequate support and resources, whilst ensuring that the play process is safe and organised (Cheung, Keung & Tam, 2022). Therefore, the role played by teachers in play-based curriculum is considered crucial. On the other hand, with the continuous reform and updating of curriculum concepts and resources, teachers' curricular activities in kindergartens today have become more diversified, and the choice of curriculum has become more flexible, thus helping more and more children to find the most suitable way of learning through lively and interesting play (Niu, 2023). This also downplays China's one-sided view of 'play' and 'learning' as opposites (Wang, Li, Fler & Ma, 2023).

The reason why play curricula are favoured in an increasing number of countries is that in the educational context of kindergarten, play is often a self-directed, spontaneous, and purposeful activity; children can engage in experimentation and exploration in play curricula, and it can help children to reach their aspirations of being closer to the adult world (Garvis, Keary & McCallum, 2024; Fler, Walker, White, Veresov & Duhn, 2020). With regard to interactions triggered through play, Fung and Chung (2023), and Suryani and Fler (2024), suggested that interaction between peers is an important way for children to learn, and by observing the environment and engaging in play activities with peers, which children are able to effectively develop social skills and problem-solving abilities. In recent years, the key role of play in early childhood education has been further consolidated with the support of a number of literatures that emphasise its importance in children's language development, problem solving skills, and the development of social skills (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020;

Galbraith, 2022; Niland, 2023; Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020; Zhai, Blom, Dillon, Wu & Yan, 2024). Kekesi, Donkor, Aburampah and Torkonyo (2019), argued that in play-based curriculum, teachers can help to make connections between children and their surroundings while intentionally facilitating children's learning and development. The importance of children making connections with their environment is emphasised in the constructivist theory proposed by Jean Piaget. Constructivist theory emphasises that children actively construct their own knowledge through interaction with the environment. According to this theory it can be found that learning is an active process in which children gradually develop an understanding of the world by exploring and manipulating objects (Piaget, 1952). In addition, constructivist theory supports children's learning through exploration and experimentation in play sessions, emphasising the spontaneity of play and children's initiative.

On the other hand, play-based curriculum are rich and diverse range, except indoors, there are also play curriculum that interact with the natural environment outdoors. Outdoor play activities not only improve children's gross motor skills, but also help children to benefit from contact with sunlight, natural elements, and harmless microorganisms, which in turn improves their immune system and reduces their chances of getting sick (Frances, Quinn, Elliott & Bird, 2024). Therefore, the Chinese government also has a clear policy on outdoor play curriculum. In the Regulations and Procedures for Kindergartens (State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China, cited in 1996), it is stated that full-day kindergartens need to ensure that children have at least two hours of outdoor play per day, and boarding kindergartens need to have at least three hours of outdoor play. Nowadays, kindergartens around the world are encouraged to use the natural environment for play curriculum, to promote children's interaction with nature, to learn to unravel the mysteries of the natural world through play, and to train children's self-reflection skills and stimulate their curiosity (Zhai, Blom, Dillon, Wu & Yan, 2024).

The Development History of Chinese Kindergarten Play Curriculum

In traditional Chinese culture, play have always been an important part of children's lives. For example, traditional games such as hide-and-seek, kicking the keys, and throwing sandbags. The presence of play not only entertains children but also promotes the development of their physical coordination and social skills (Pyle, Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020). In the early 1900s, China began to establish kindergartens in the modern sense of the word and introduced the first regulations for preschool education, but the regulations were adapted from Japanese kindergarten regulations (Qi & Melhuish, 2016). Subsequently, early kindergarten play curricula drew on Western pedagogical philosophies that emphasised child-centred free play and exploration (Li, Jiang & Deng, 2023). However, Li, Jiang and Deng (2023), stated that due to social and economic constraints, the implementation of play curricula was relatively simple, focusing on indoor play and simple outdoor activities. After the establishment of New China, the government carried out several reforms to early childhood education, and the political system was officially transformed into a socialist state of the city. Qi and Melhuish (2016), showed that during that time period, under the guidance of Soviet education experts, the emphasis was placed on early education as a teacher-centred, teacher-led programme of planned, purposeful learning activities for children. Until the 1980s, the kindergarten's play curriculum gradually received attention, and began to form a systematic curriculum design. Legislative documents for preschool education in China, such as the Regulations on the Administration of Kindergartens and the Regulations on the Work of Kindergartens (Trial),

issued by the Ministry of National Education, made it clear that preschool education was the cornerstone of the education system (Qi & Melhuish, 2016). During this period, in order to achieve the purpose of educating and caring for children in the policy, the early play curriculum puts more emphasis on collective activities and discipline, so the dominant position of teachers in the game is obvious (Brooks & Kitto, 2021).

Early childhood education in China has been further developed since 2001, with the incorporation of more international educational concepts and the promulgation of the Guidelines for Pre-school Education. Play curriculum began to focus on children's autonomy and creativity, adding more free play time and diverse play activities (Zhai, Blom, Dillon, Wu & Yan, 2024). However, the uneven distribution of educational resources, coupled with the fact that early education is not included in compulsory education, has led to significant differences in the implementation of play curricula between urban and rural kindergartens. In contrast, early childhood education in China received a new stage of development in 2010, when the State Council executive meeting promulgated the long term education reform and development plan (2010- 2020), which was a regulation to help all Chinese children's to have access to pre-school education, which also includes children in poorer areas, and to reduce the disparity in early childhood education between urban and rural areas (Qi & Melhuish, 2016). Overall, in the 21st century, with the continuous improvement of education policies and the increased social attention to early childhood education, the practice of kindergarten play curriculum has been improving. Modern kindergarten play curricula are beginning to show a trend of diversification and internationalisation. Lin, Wu, Wu and He (2022), indicated that when designing play curriculum, teachers focus on combining local cultures and international advanced experiences, so as to design play activities that are most suitable for Chinese children. For example, early childhood educators designed 'Anji play' with the local Chinese culture, which is based on the educational concept of helping children to become competent active learners (Lin, Wu, Wu & He, 2022). In addition, with the development of the times, the development of technology has also brought new elements to the play curriculum, such as the application of digital games and interactive media has also begun to be integrated into the teaching of kindergarten curriculum (Istenič, Rosanda, Volk & Gačnik, 2023). Kindergarten play curricula in China have undergone continuous evolution and reform from traditional to modern, and at the same time reflect the continuous scientificisation of the people's educational philosophy and the improvement of socio-economic conditions.

Current situation of Chinese kindergarten play curriculum

Fung and Chung (2023), and Niu (2023), suggested that play currently occupies an important place in Chinese kindergarten curricula and is used to develop children's cognitive, social and emotional skills. In order to promote education, the government has been updating early childhood education policies in recent years, and the educational function and goal orientation of play has been re-emphasised in the Ministry of Education's (MOE) latest update of the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial) (MOE, 2021). However, Li, Jiang and Deng (2023) indicated that current Chinese play curricula are more structured and goal-oriented, with play being used as a tool to achieve specific pedagogical goals. This design philosophy reflects the emphasis on academic achievement and discipline in the Chinese education system. Compared to early childhood educators in other countries, Chinese kindergarten teachers tend to take a more active role in play; favouring direct instruction and control of the

play process to ensure that children acquire specific knowledge and skills during play (Keung & Fung, 2020; Wang, Li, Fleeer & Ma, 2023). In fact, kindergarten teachers are more involved in play because they need to design and direct play activities to ensure that educational goals are achieved, and because Chinese teachers are more concerned with the development of students' discipline and sense of community. In contrast to previous years, in today's play curricula, teachers often include cultural elements in the design of play curricula, reflecting the influence of indigenous cultures on children's education (Zhai, Blom, Dillon, Wu & Yan, 2024). For example, traditional games and festivals are often incorporated into interactive play curricula, aiming to pass on and promote Chinese culture. The integration of culture helps young children to develop a national cultural identity and a sense of social responsibility, and the design of such a curriculum helps to provide a holistic, healthy, and fun learning environment for young children. On the other hand, Niu (2023) stated that although the Chinese approach to education also valued children's initiative and the education reform emphasised increased playtime, there were still more teacher-led play activities in practice. This is because this approach is seen as helping to ensure the educational value of play activities, but it has also led to discussions about how to find a balance between structured teaching and free play (Miller, Kumar, Pearce & Baldock, 2022; McHugh, Litchfield, Pearson & Le Busque, 2023).

However, it is worth noting that even with the continuous promotion and reform of play curriculum, there are still a number of kindergarten teachers have expressed some challenges or barriers in implementing play-based learning programmes (Yin, Cheung, Tam & Lau, 2023). Yin, Cheung, Tam and Lau (2023), and Wang, Li, Fleeer and Ma (2023), and Wang et al (2022), indicated that in the process of designing and implementing play-based curriculum, especially kindergarten teachers in public schools in China are inevitably affected by the policy requirements, parent satisfaction, unequal teacher-student ratios, curricular concerns and structural challenges. Particularly in terms of parents' beliefs and attitudes, influenced by traditional attitudes and concerns about the future learning pressure on their children when they reach the upper grades, most parents favour the pursuit of academics; most parents view learning as a serious activity and play as a relaxing activity after learning (Wang, Li, Fleeer & Ma, 2023; Keung & Fung, 2020; Pyle, Prioletta & Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020). The same situation occurs not only among Chinese parents but also in other countries, where parents inevitably perceive play as distractions and hindrances to learning. Yin, Cheung, Tam and Lau (2023) and Li, Jiang and Deng (2023), stated that the inclusion of play parents worry that their children will only play and not learn, which leads to a sense of mistrust between parents and teachers. Therefore, how to eliminate parents' mistrust and scepticism towards teachers' education methods is also a problem that needs to be solved by early educators nowadays. In addition, in Chinese kindergartens, it is usually arranged for two teachers and one nursery nurse to take care of 20 to 30 children, which inevitably results in children who do not receive adequate attention and care. Wang et al (2023), suggested that the low teacher-student ratio in Chinese kindergartens hinders the implementation of play-based pedagogy and that teachers are unable to support each child in his or her individualised development. As a result, many Chinese early childhood practitioners choose to use play as a reward for guiding children through learning activities, rather than integrating play into learning activities.

Furthermore, in the outdoor play curriculum, although the benefits of outdoor activities have been emphasised in China's early education policy and have attracted the attention of

kindergartens and educators, Lin et al (2022), stated that Chinese kindergartens do not allow any hazardous elements, such as puddles, steep slopes, and muddy pools, in outdoor equipment. But children will quickly lose interest in playing in outdoor spaces that do not have any adventurous elements or overprotected sports (Lin et al 2022; Niu, 2023). Therefore, Niu (2023), suggested that kindergartens can introduce new and exciting, unstructured, and adventure play curriculum that are more engaging and stimulating than overly secured and boring outdoor spaces to promote children's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. With the development of the times and the popularity of the benefits of play curriculum, there are many Chinese kindergartens that value and support young children's contact with nature. For example, kindergartens provide vegetable gardens for children to grow fruits and vegetables, allowing them to explore the world of science. Xiao (2022), stated that in ecopsychological theories, children's behaviours and identities are shaped by the natural world and that children can expand their knowledge and experience, thus facilitating young children's learning and development in the future. In addition, China's policy of mandating the length of outdoor activities in kindergartens allows children to interact with the natural environment on a regular basis, enabling them to improve their motor skills. And when children are exposed to sunlight, natural elements and harmless microorganisms, it promotes bone development and strengthens the immune system (Frances, Quinn, Elliott & Bird, 2024). As far as outdoor activities are concerned, kindergartens in China are currently following the policy. However, the use of large outdoor equipment and natural elements is not ideal for every kindergarten, either because of the size of the kindergarten, financial constraints, or for reasons of child protection.

The Development of Kindergarten Play Curriculum in Different Countries

The importance of play in early childhood education has long been widely recognised by the global education community. Different countries have different concepts and practical approaches to the design and implementation of kindergarten play curriculum. Compared with China, Europe and the United States pay more attention to children's sense of belonging and identity, the cultivation of social and life skills, and free play integrated with the natural environment. For example, kindergarten play programmes in the United States focus on children's autonomy and creativity, and the educational philosophy emphasises the development of social skills and problem-solving abilities through play (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2022). Rodriguez-Meehan (2022), suggested that the early childhood teacher's role in play is more of a facilitator, encouraging children to explore and learn through free play to explore and learn. This ensures that the children are at the centre of the play and is the leader of the play. In Australia, the kindergarten play curriculum has been developed in accordance with the Australian EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009); the Australian EYLF aims to promote children's learning through play and to provide broad guidance to educators in their curriculum decisions (Guarrella, Driel, & Cohrsen, 2022). The Australian play curriculum combines structured and free play, and teachers design play activities with a focus on cultural diversity and inclusivity to ensure that all children can participate and benefit (McHugh, Litchfield, Pearson & Le Busque, 2023 ; Guarrella, Driel & Cohrsen, 2022). Moreover, children learn to respect other cultures during play activities, which helps them to successfully integrate into a diverse society. In addition, Australian kindergartens pay special attention to promoting children's emotional and social development through play as a pathway to diverse and authentic learning opportunities for children (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020). Finland is known for its high-quality education

system, where play plays an important part in the kindergarten curriculum. Finnish EC National Core Curriculum follows a holistic approach to instruction, education and care as an integrated course, with different emphases on activities for children of different ages (Havu-Nuutinen et al., 2022). Furthermore, Havu-Nuutinen et al (2022), stated that Finnish kindergartens have a more explicit focus on the natural environment and science as a specific area of learning than Australian EYLFs, and that children are able to engage in a programme of targeted science activities in play. In this regard, Zhai et al (2024) suggested that the natural environment not only serves as a canvas for children's imaginative scenarios, but also stimulates curiosity, promotes creativity and interaction, and problem-solving skills.

In Southeast Asian countries, early childhood education has also received great attention. For example, in Malaysia's Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025, it is stated that the main objectives of the early childhood education (ECE) curriculum and related policies require educators to focus on the holistic development and balance of students (Nordin & Mohamed, 2023). Furthermore, Nordin and Mohamed (2023) stated that in the Early Childhood Care (ECC) curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, there is an emphasis on the need for educators to use a flexible teaching and integrated approach to help support children's development in an enjoyable and safe environment. The play-based curriculum is effective in taking into account the abilities of each child, and teachers are able to develop flexible educational programmes through play-based activities to help children continue to learn and develop in a way that is most appropriate for them (Nordin & Mohamed, 2023). Whereas Indonesia also promotes a child-centred play curriculum, Jusni, Fonsén and Ahtiainen (2023), argued that play can develop finer distinctions for learning, helping children to learn in areas of interest to them, and thus achieve joyful learning. In addition, the benefits of a play-based curriculum are that it constructs a child's sense of identity, helps them to positively develop their self-concept, and enables them to learn about the similarities and diversity between different races through play (Jusni, Fonsén & Ahtiainen, 2023). In addition, Vu (2021), stated that early childhood education in Vietnam, after more than fifty years of historical changes and continuous reforms in education policies, has successfully transformed the teacher-centred teaching and learning approach to a child-centred approach. And in the new pre-school education programme, kindergartens are required to set up different play corners where children have the opportunity to work individually or in small groups, thus helping children to realise their learning potential in play activities (Vu, 2021). Overall, the gap between early childhood education in most developing countries in Asia and developed countries in Europe and the United States is slowly narrowing. Governments, educators, and parents are beginning to take early childhood education seriously, and are no longer treating kindergartens and teachers as babysitters and childminders. Kindergartens are constantly updating and reforming their resources and equipment to ensure that children learn through play.

Challenges and Problems Faced by Play Curriculum in China

In terms of the challenges and problems faced by play-based curriculum in China, except the mentioned possibility obstacles from parents' attitudes and mistrust, and the unequal teacher-student ratios, Pyle, Prioletta and Alaca (2020), stated that the lack of instructional time, instructional and play materials, classrooms, and out-of-home space for activities in kindergartens can likewise affects teachers' implementation of the play curriculum. For example, the learning objectives of play corners in the kindergarten classrooms are too

specific and lack of appeal; as well as the limited amount of time for children to play, which results in young children spending most of the day doing a single thing under the control of the teacher, thus defeating the purpose of teaching flexibility and variety (Niu, 2023). Secondly, Niu (2023), suggested that there is a common problem among Chinese teachers, which is the lack of inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning and differentiated teaching experiences. Because Chinese teachers have always been seen as authority figures in teaching, they are used to controlling students' behaviour; their backward view of play has led to the belief that learning and play are separate, and they have difficulties in incorporating play into their daily learning practices (Niu, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). In addition, Wang, Li, Fler and Ma (2023), indicated that there is inevitably a conflict between the introduction of the policy and the values of early childhood teachers, who pay less attention to play and focus mainly on teaching during the delivery of play-based programmes, as teachers believe that learning will be difficult to produce without active teaching or leadership of young children. Therefore, how to resolve the value conflicts and contradictions arising from teachers' new policies or teaching strategies so as to fulfil the policy teaching requirements will be an issue to be addressed in future research.

Nowadays, play-based learning is a major strategy in early education, which means that teachers' engagement and practice can have a crucial impact on the future development of play-based learning. However, a number of teachers lack training, professional development and learning about play-based learning strategies (Pyle, Prioletta & Alaca, 2020; Niu, 2023; Brooks & Kitto, 2021). This is because, early childhood education in most countries around the globe is not within the scope of compulsory state education, resulting in the number of private kindergartens far exceeding the number of public kindergartens, and private kindergartens that lack governmental assistance struggle to develop teachers' competence to practise their profession, and have a high prevalence of informal and unqualified practitioners (Jusni, Fonsén & Ahtiainen, 2023). In addition, Cheung, Keung and Tam (2022) and Brooks and Kitto (2021) indicated that teachers lacked professional training and practical experience in relation to the play-based curriculum, which may be due to heavy teaching loads, insufficient professional resources, and long working hours that make it difficult for teachers to cope with the workload, and thus the lack of training in skills and knowledge in relation to the curriculum. As a result, there are still many children who can not benefit from play-based learning programmes.

The Future Development Direction of Kindergarten Play Curriculum in China

Taking into account the challenges and problems faced by play curricula, it is suggested that China's kindergarten play curricula in the future can start from three aspects: curriculum improvement and optimisation, teachers' professional quality enhancement, and policy and social support. Regarding curriculum improvement and optimisation, firstly, China can learn from the successful teaching experiences of developed educational countries such as Australia, Finland and the United States, and combine them with local culture and educational realities, so as to optimise the design of kindergarten play curricula. For example, Finland focuses on integration into nature and play in natural environments, while the United States emphasises autonomy and creativity (Kekesi, Donkor, Aburampah & Torkonyo, 2019; Havu-Nuutinen, (2022). By combining these experiences, the holistic development of children can be better promoted. Secondly, kindergartens can reinforce the flexibility and diversity of the curriculum. Currently, because of teachers' traditional concepts and values, kindergarten play curricula

are still somewhat homogeneous and rigid in their design and implementation (Niu, 2023). In the future, kindergartens should strengthen the flexibility and diversity of the curriculum, provide children with rich choices of indoor and outdoor play activities, and meet the interests and developmental needs of different children.

In the promotion of teacher's professional quality, the most important thing is to enhance the professional training of teachers. Ozturk and Ozer (2021) stated that the role of teachers in the play curriculum is crucial. In the future, kindergartens should further enhance the professional training of teachers while reducing their teaching load to improve their ability to instruct, support and guide in play activities. The training should include knowledge of play theory, activity design, and child psychology. However, while focusing on the development of teachers' professional competence, Yin et al (2023) and Whitlock, Eivers and Walker (2023), indicated in addition to improving teachers' personal competence and self-efficacy in implementing new strategies, kindergartens also need to actively cultivate a professional learning community to help teachers to be able to work in a trusting and supportive work environment. Furthermore, governments and kindergartens should encourage teachers to undertake continuing professional development. Teachers' professionalism depends not only on initial training, but also on continuous professional development (Ozturk & Ozer, 2021). It is recommended that teachers be encouraged and supported to participate in various professional development activities such as seminars, workshops and academic exchanges in order to keep their educational experience and teaching methods at the forefront. It will also help teachers to mitigate the contradictions and conflicts that arise between values or traditional concepts and new teaching policies.

Finally, with regard to policies and social support, the optimization and implementation of government policies are required first. Hesterman and Targowska (2020) stated that the government plays an important role in promoting the reform and development of kindergarten play curriculum. In the future, relevant policies should be further optimised and refined to ensure their effective implementation. Currently, many kindergartens lack the financial resources to implement play curriculum (Miller et al 2022; Yin et al 2023). In this regard, the government can support the development of the play curriculum by increasing financial input and improving the teacher training system. In addition, in terms of social support, the participation of parents and the community can be enhanced. Chen, Rouse and Morrissey (2023) indicated that the support of parents and the community can help to promote the development of play curriculum. In this regard, parents should be scientifically educated to enhance their understanding and support of play programmes and encouraged to actively participate in children's play activities. At the same time, through community activities and publicity, the importance and support of society for early childhood education should be raised.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper is expected to provide insights into the importance of kindergarten play curricula for governments, ministries of education, kindergarten administrators, preschool teachers, and parents. Compared with developed countries in education, the future development of kindergarten play curriculum in China requires multifaceted efforts, including curriculum improvement, teacher professional competence enhancement, policy optimisation, and parental and social support. Comprehensive strategies can better promote

young children's holistic learning and development. In order to promote the continuous improvement of the quality of the country's early childhood education, future research in early childhood education can focus on the difficulties and challenges currently faced by play programmes and conduct targeted research.

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