

From 'Cinderella' to 'beloved princess': The evolution of early childhood education policy in China ^[1]

Author: Li, Hui; Yang, Weipeng & Chen, Jennifer J.

Source: International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy

Publication Date: 1 Aug 2016

AVAILABILITY

Full article PDF available to read online ^[2]

Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) in China has been relegated to the role of 'Cinderella' by its educational authorities since 1980s, due to the policy of 'marketizing and privatizing non-compulsory pre-school education'. In 2010, dramatically and suddenly, 'Cinderella' emerged as the 'beloved princess' as the central government of China decided to pay more attention to ECE. This paper aims to understand why and how the Chinese government changed its attitude and policies, by conducting a critical analysis of the evolution of ECE policies in the past century with a particular focus on the post- 2010 development. On the basis of this analysis, we offer our outlook on what the Chinese government should do to better deal with the future development of its ECE. Our results revealed three vertical and horizontal trends. First, from a vertical perspective, the top-down reform has been the most prevalent during the evolution of ECE policy in China. Second, from a horizontal perspective, the significance of public and private kindergartens can be ascertained by their numbers: the number of public kindergartens has decreased sharply since 1980s, while that of private kindergartens increased substantially as a supplement. Last but not the least, combining the vertical and horizontal perspectives, we found that accessibility, affordability and accountability problems, and the social justice and sustainability of the ECE system, are all realistic challenges imposed on the inevitable evolution of ECE reform in China. Yet, they also present equally considerable opportunities for establishing more efficient funding and monitoring reforms and policies.

Region: Asia ^[3]

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