

# Nurturing Children in China – What Role for Kindergarten?

## CAREFULLY LEARNING FROM THE U.S.

Lecture and Discussion

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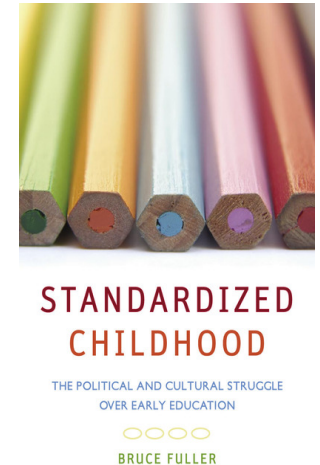
Special thanks to Song Yingquan and Liu Hui



# Nurturing Children in China – What Role for Kindergarten?

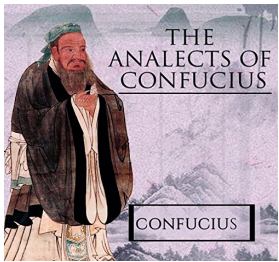
## ISSUES TO EXPLORE IN CHINA AND THE U.S.

- Differing philosophies for how to nurture and teach children in (diverse) cultural contexts.
- Challenges facing China: unequal access and quality of kindergarten among provinces and social classes.
- Lessons from the U.S.
  - ‘Mixed market’ of kindergarten providers.
  - Forms of quality that nurture diverse children.
  - Empirical frontier: What we do not know.
- Moving forward: Key decision points for China. CHAPTER 1 in revised *Standardized Childhood*.



## ISSUE 1. Differing philosophies for how to nurture and teach children in cultural context?

- How to best raise young children is a vital question, loudly debated, in any human society.
- China 1903, founding of European-style (Froebel) kindergartens, learning through play in natural gardens. Followed by Dewey.
- Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946) argued that kindergarten should be open to all children, advance moral rules, help build a nation.
- Mao, by 1956, tied kindergarten expansion to women's rising labor force participation; shades of Soviet-style schooling.
- Rising funding and regulation in the 1980s, then again in 2010. Ministry imported Western philosophy, to advance the child's "independent personality and integrity... their individual differences and developmental needs." Ministry urges "active learning" and "play-based learning". What would Confucius say?



## Similar philosophical debates in the U.S. – a colorfully diverse society

- Learning through play or structured learning tasks?
- Cognitive learning goals aligned with primary school, focused on academic knowledge?
- Nurturing individual child's growth and curiosity, or socializing children to work in a formal organization?
- Language and culturally situated learning goals.



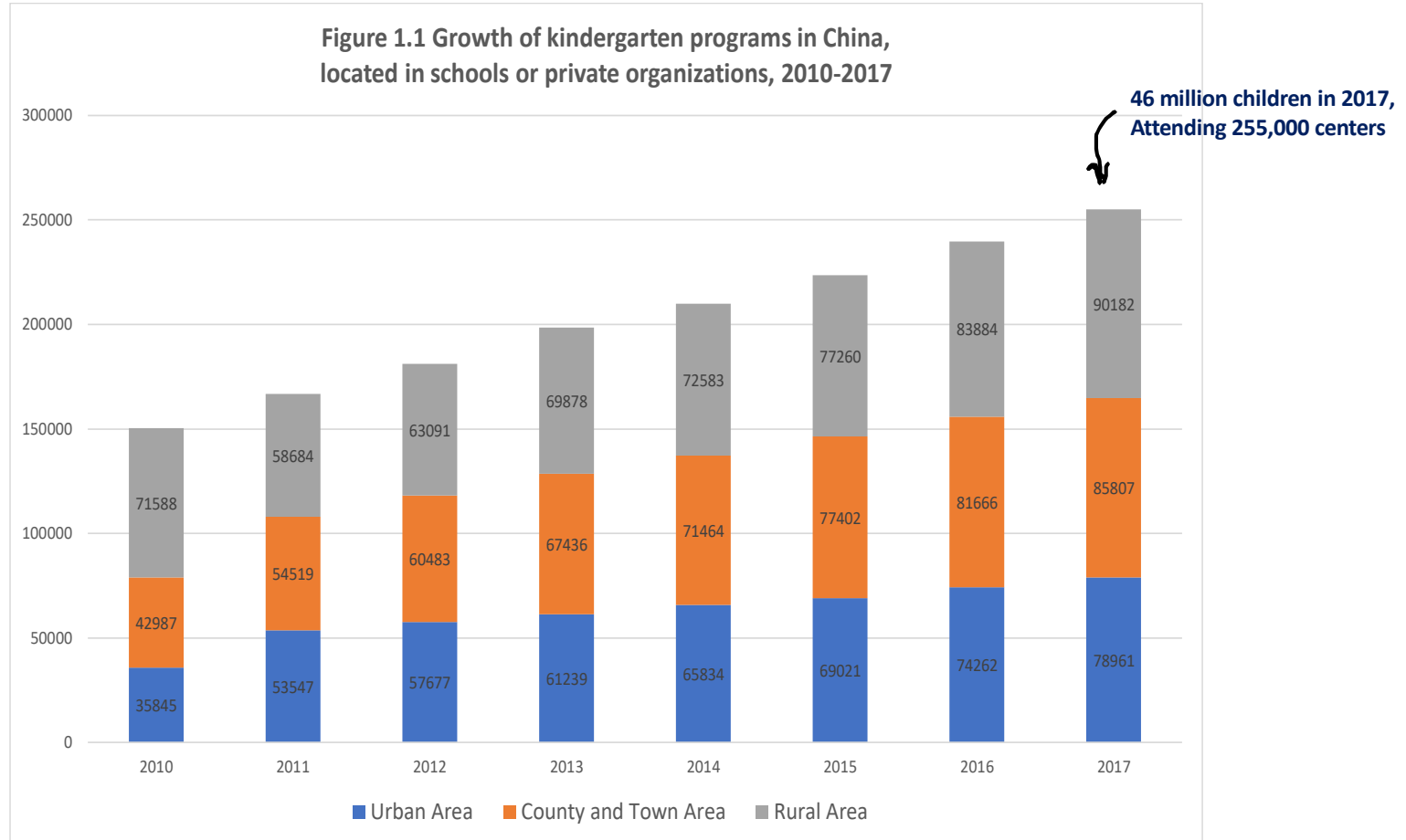


## ISSUE 2. Unequal access for families – Does kindergarten reduce or reinforce disparities in children's growth?

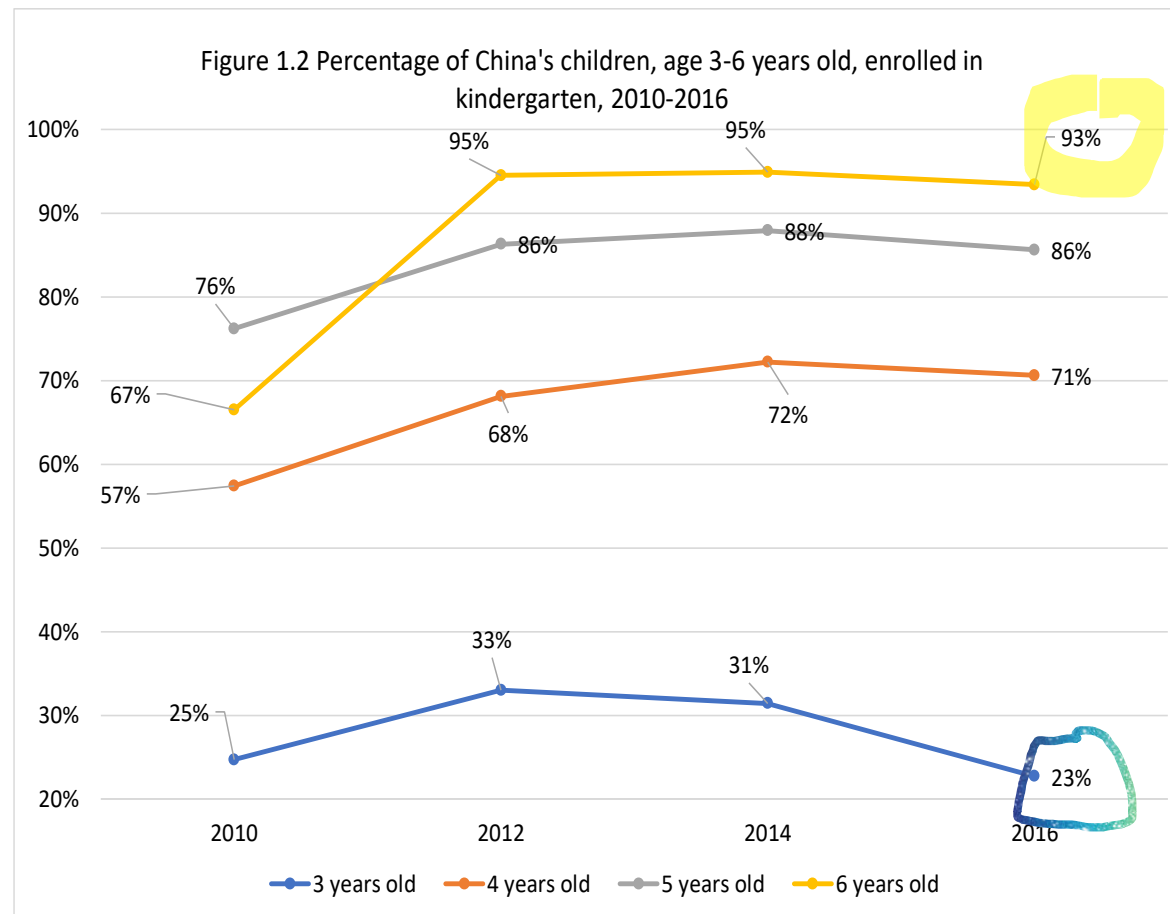
- Initial growth of China's kindergarten in 1958, Great Leap Forward, yet followed by closing many rural classrooms.
- Another expansive surge after 1978, with China's opening to the West: state-owned firms and family spending rises.
- By 1995, an estimated 27.1 children, age 3-6, enrolled in kindergartens.
- Renewed focus in 2010: China State Council promises one year of free, universal kindergarten. Three-year action plans down to the county level.
- Percentage of children enrolled climbed from 36% in 2001 to about 75% in 2017.



## Steady, long-term expansion of kindergarten in China

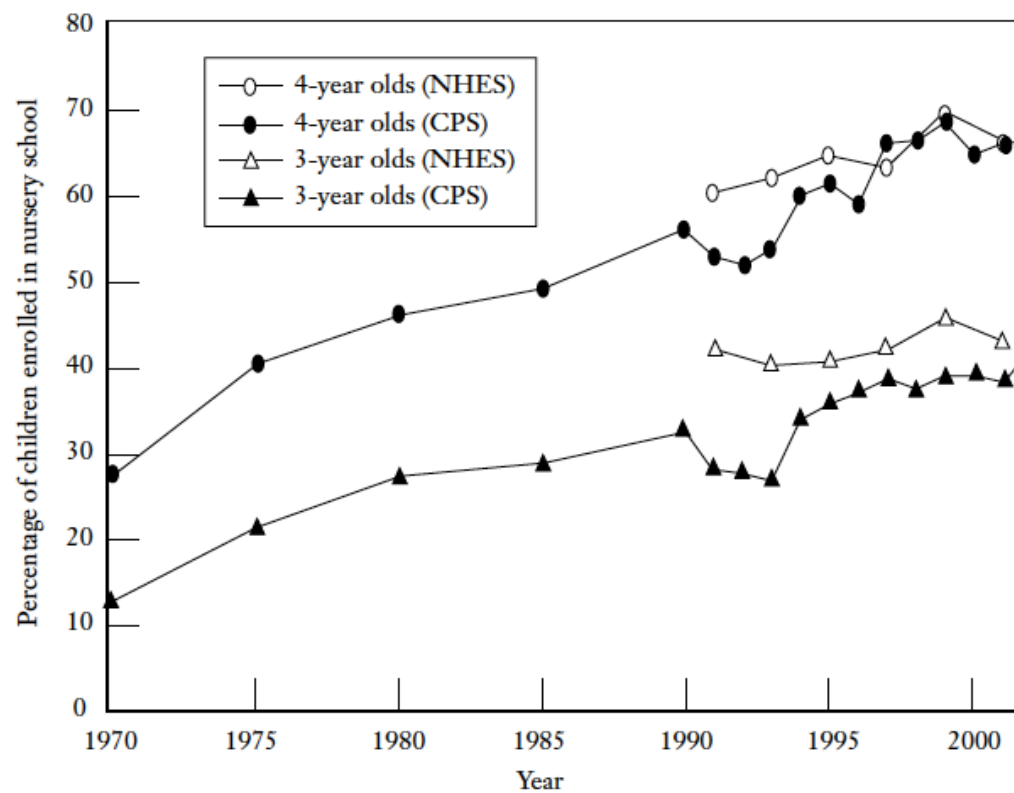


## Expansion for 6 year-olds, level enrollment of 3 year-olds

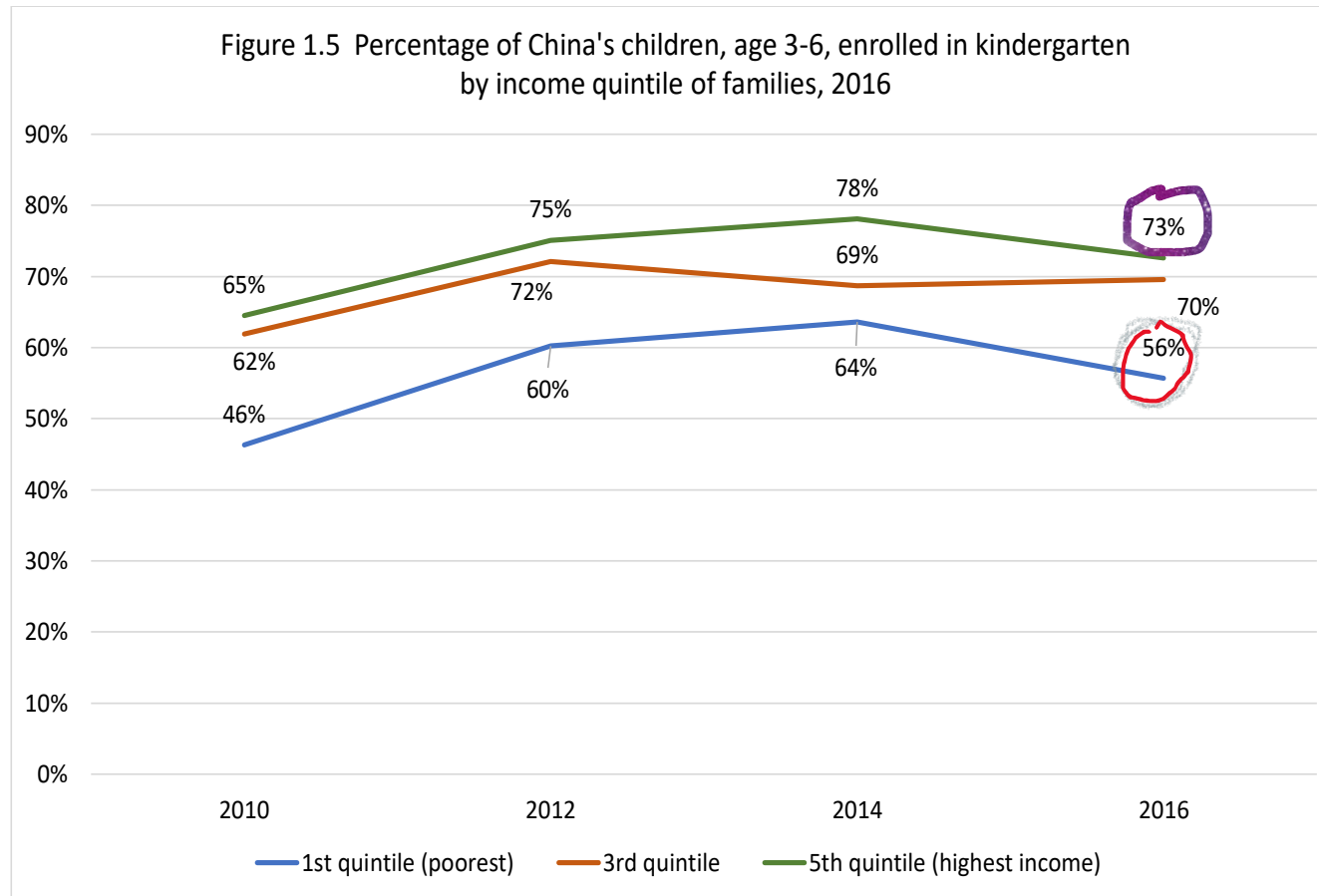


## But China has surpassed U.S. in 'preschool' enrollment among 4-year-olds

Preschool enrollment rates by age in U.S., 1970-2005

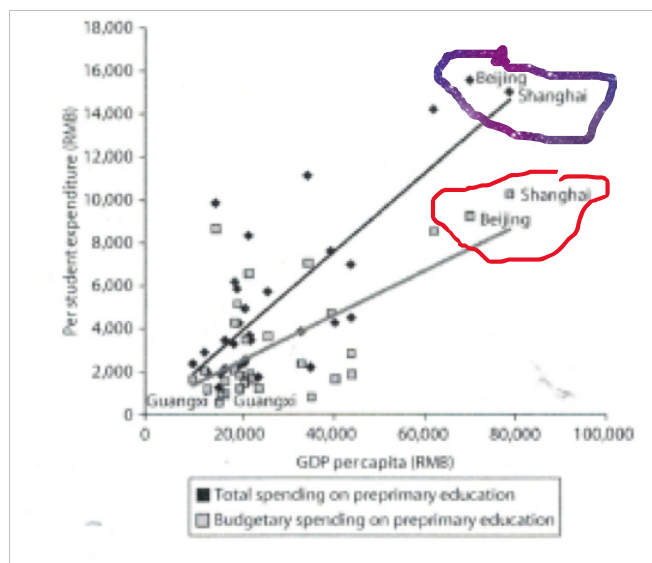


## Children of high-income families more likely to attend kindergarten



## Wealth or poverty of provinces drives per-child spending on kindergarten (government and total spending)

Government spending on kindergarten by province in China, 2009



## ISSUE 2. Lessons from the U.S. – equalizing access to poor families

- Washington and state governments have focused funding on low-income families since 1960s.
- Multiple policy levers: Parent vouchers, tax credits, and preschool centers.
- Quality regulation: homes and preschool centers.
- *Distribution of supply*: Mixed-market yields uneven quality, high prices for middle-class families. Shortage of affordable centers.
- Long-term supply effects from Covid-19?
- *Demand constraints*: Language and cultural barriers, unstable and irregular work hours of parents.



### ISSUE 3. Strengths and inequities with 'mixed markets' of kindergarten organizations – private and government

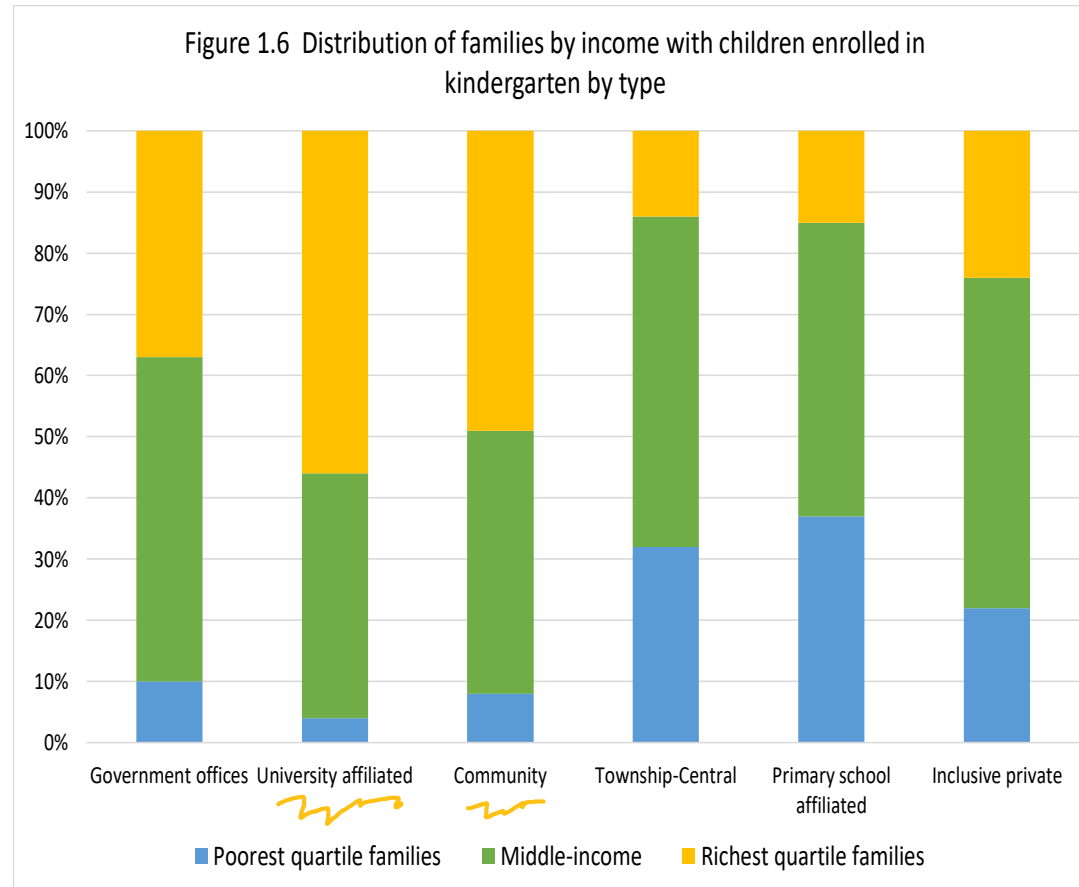


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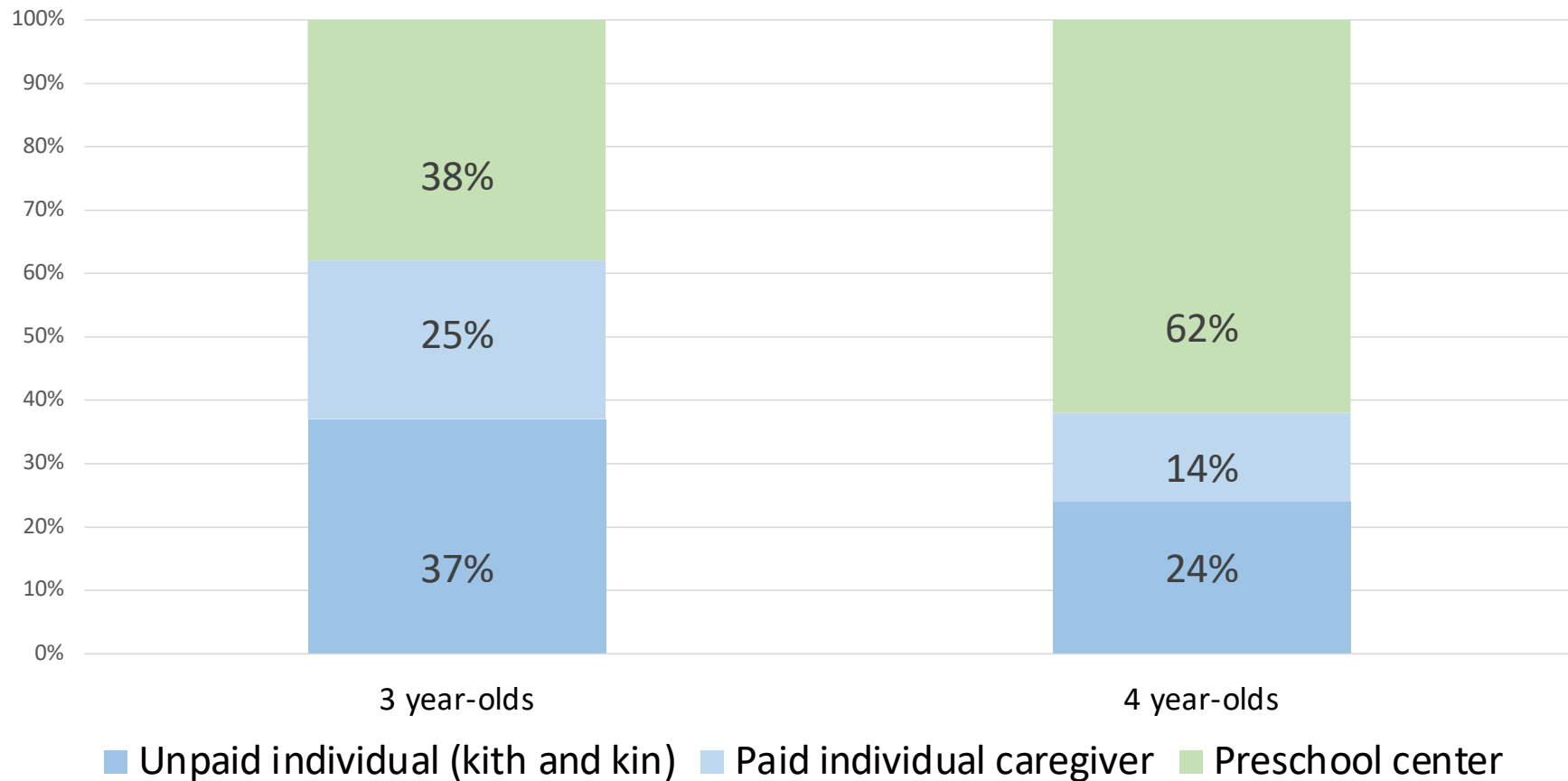
- China's kindergarten expansion financed in part by rising family investment from the middle class.
- Count of kindergarten centers grew by 30% in rural areas, 2010-2017. But more than doubled in cities.
- Only 15% of K's financed by parent fees in 1997. By 2017, 63% were entirely fee supported by families.
- So, kindergarten increasingly propels middle and upper income families, but less so for poor families.



## Family income (in part) drives the type of kindergarten that children attend



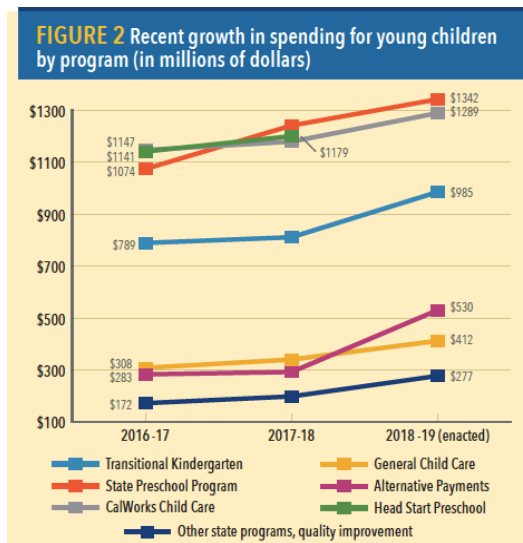
## In the U.S. – Working parents rely on differing child-care or preschool providers, paid individuals and centers



### ISSUE 3. Lessons from the U.S. on financing mixed-markets of preschools (and individual caregivers)

- Governments in the U.S. liberally supportive of parental choice: preschool vouchers, not only preschool centers.
- ... many options but uneven levels of quality.
- Multiple and often confusing points of access for families.
- Government experimenting with 'consumer information' on the quality of preschools.
- Various constituencies grow strong to protect and expand elements of the U.S. mixed market.

Seven different state programs  
In California



## ISSUE 4. How to define and improve kindergarten quality?



- We know that quality kindergartens in China raise the early learning and development of young children.
- What is not understood is what elements of ‘quality’ drive gains in child development. Moving from material ‘inputs’ to child-adult interactions.
- Debate in China and the U.S. over how elements of quality influence differing forms of learning – among differing cultural contexts [for example, language].
- Universals and cultural particulars: teachers that foster rich language, or nurture confidence and competence?
- Less known empirically about the comparative cost-effectiveness of how to improve kindergarten quality.

## High-quality kindergarten lifts young children's learning... but through what quality mechanisms?

- Correlational studies and true experiments have demonstrated benefits for young children: Wong (2013) in Henan Province, Rao et al. (2012) in Guizhou Province, and Hu et al. in Guangdong (2017) – raising *cognitive skills, poor children*.
- What is not understood empirically in China:
  - Do middle-class children benefit?
  - Which elements of kindergarten quality drive cognitive and social-emotional gains for children?
  - Do kindergarten effects persist through school?



## Learning about *how* quality lifts young children in China [mechanisms]



- *Teacher preparation*: Li et al. (2016) in Zhejiang Province, larger kindergarten effects when teachers hold college degrees and carefully organize instructional activities. Whole class teaching.
- *Classroom 'inputs'*: Hu et al. (2016) identified parent fee levels, teacher salaries, staffing ratios, teacher professional identity.
- *Social organization, 'scaffolding'*: Hu's team found stronger kindergarten effects from small groups and teacher's steady conversation and support of children's activities.
- Chinese (and American) scholars often rely on Western measures of quality, independent of cultural or social-class contexts.

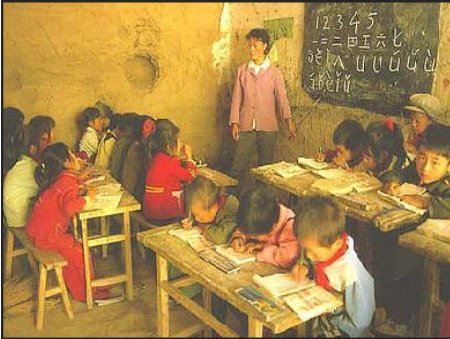
## ISSUE 4. Lessons from the U.S. on which quality mechanisms work

- *Material inputs* matter in poor communities: Facilities, teacher salaries, class size, learning materials.
- *Organizing classroom activities*: Fostering cognitive growth, oral language development, focusing children on learning tasks.
- *Social relations, scaffolding, emotional support* between children and adults: Extent that adults (teachers or aides) foster rich language, build from what children understand, and elicit questions from children.
- How to culturally situate quality elements? Individual growth and cooperating with others; cognitive, academic, or social skills; creative and agile, or fitting into the collective good?

Empirical [review](#) (Fuller, Bridges, & Land, 2020)



## Moving forward in China – Key decisions points



- Distinguish philosophical (ideological) topics from empirically testable claims: Debate learning goals, then study what elements of quality advance children toward these aims.
- Remember that nearly 20 million Chinese live in extreme poverty (rural areas and cities).
- Labor rules – including for migrant parents – will shape children's learning and growth.
- How to reduce disparities in kindergarten access and quality? Advance stronger research.
- Borrow carefully and critically from the West. 'Modern child rearing' is an ideological stance. Is a third way possible?



# Thank you. Please ask your questions!

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