

Article

Is Free Early Childhood Education a Sustainable Solution? Evidence from the Case Study of Nanjing

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Abstract: This case study adopted a mixed methods approach to understanding how and why the free early childhood education (ECE) policy in Nanjing, China, was formulated, implemented, and failed, using the “policy cycle” framework. Many countries have implemented the free ECE policy to solve affordability and accessibility problems without considering policy sustainability; thus, they have to discontinue the policy. Nanjing is no exception. Altogether 232 kindergarten principals and teaching/research staff were randomly sampled and surveyed, and 5 kindergarten principals and 5 teaching/researcher staff were interviewed. The results indicated that there were many obstacles to the policy’s sustainability, including conflict of interest, inefficient policy implementation, insufficient funding, and more social inequality issues. Additionally, the policymakers made mistakes in the five domains of the policy cycle: the context of influence, the context of policy text production, the context of practice, the context of outcomes, and the context of political strategy. Finally, the three important lessons for a more sustainable policy decision process are discussed.

Keywords: early childhood education (ECE); free early childhood education; policy cycle; sustainability



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1. Introduction

Free early childhood education (ECE) has been regarded as a “penicillin” to solve affordability and accessibility problems; thus, it is implemented in many countries around the world [1]. The most popular policy is one-year free ECE, assuring young children’s one-year preschool education before school entry, which has been implemented in over 100 countries and regions [2]. China is no exception. Since 2010, central governments have made great efforts to accelerate the development of ECE, a world-known phenomenon called the “Great Leap Forward of ECE” [3]. Consequently, the national rate of ECE enrolment reached 88.1% in 2021, with 48.05 million children in preschools. This is a remarkable achievement in universalizing ECE in such a populous country. However, the number of enrollments in 2021 fell by 130,500, and this fall is very likely to continue due to the sheer decline in birth rate in the past five years. Studies have identified many causes for this birth rate drop, and the most cited one is that young parents dare not to give birth because they cannot afford the costs of raising and educating new babies [4]. This finding implies that the affordability of ECE has become the stumbling block to the sustainable development of China. Nanjing (NJ), where the father of ECE, Mr. Heqin Chen, has lived and studied for a half-century, is a forerunner in the field of ECE and the first to see the development and implementation of some bold policies. The NJ educational authorities rushed forward to implement a one-year free ECE program in 2014, hoping to solve the affordability problem. However, without a scientific design and a careful plan, this policy is destined to fail; thus, it was terminated in 2022 without any official announcement. Although terminated, this “bold rush” in NJ provides a perfect example of unsustainable free ECE policymaking

and implementation and therefore deserves an empirical study. Therefore, this study is dedicated to exploring how and why the policy failed in NJ to provide valuable lessons for the sustainable development of ECE in China and other countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Theoretical Debates on Free Early Childhood Education in China*

Early childhood education (ECE) became a national concern at the turn of this millennium, as it was challenged by the ‘3As’ problem: accessibility (difficult to enter a kindergarten), affordability (expensive tuition), and accountability (poor quality and no monitoring system) [1,5]. To solve these long-lasting problems, many Chinese regions and cities have sought help from the panacea: free ECE, which is a “sound bite” that will not work out [6]. For instance, some cities in Northern China claimed that they had already implemented this policy since 2010. However, after carefully studying these cases, Li and his colleagues [1] concluded that the so-called “free” ECE were neither “all kids free” nor “all fees free”. Although having solved the affordability problem, it has not tackled the problems of accessibility, accountability, and sustainability. In Hong Kong, Chan and Sze found many disconnections between the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme and local kindergartens and, thus, some kindergartens had to charge tuition fees [7]. Furthermore, it has created a new problem: social justice, as the “free” policy is only free to public kindergartens and children from middle-class families. Another fatal problem is that the policies are unlikely to be sustainable, as they entirely rely on the local coal economy and fiscal investment at the county level [6].

Therefore, Li and his colleagues proposed a comprehensive and inclusive framework to evaluate the free ECE policies: (1) Accessibility: every young child can have unimpeded access to a kindergarten in their neighborhood; (2) Affordability: every family can easily afford the fees of the chosen kindergarten, and some exemptions could be offered to families in need of more assistance; (3) Accountability: for every kindergarten, be it public or private; the extra fiscal input provided by the policy should be accountable to the government for improving education quality; (4) Sustainability: the strong financial support to free education should be affordable to the government, and accordingly the policy could be sustainable; (5) Social justice: all young children should have equal access to and fair treatment of ECE, without any discrimination against their gender, race, religion, age, belief, disability, geographical location, social class, and socioeconomic circumstances. According to this ‘3A2S’ framework, the free ECE policies should uphold sustainability and social justice. Therefore, this study will examine the sustainability of the free ECE policy in Nanjing.

In addition, Edelman defines “political spectacles” [8] as the political constructions of reality that are produced intentionally to shape public policy, thus ultimately meeting a small group’s needs. The public audience can only see the “political spectacle” on the stage, as the political actors conceal what is really happening backstage. According to this political spectacle theory, the policy process is a set of shifting, diverse, and contradictory responses to a spectrum of political interests [8]. Politicians present the political spectacle as benefiting the public good and use emotional appeal through language and symbols perpetrated by the media to build audience receptivity to policy agendas. In this way, policymakers have shaped the public’s mindset and hypnotized them. In fact, the outcomes of free ECE might not necessarily be positive, as shown by recent studies in New Zealand and England [9,10]. Li, Wang, and Fong adopted this theory to understand how the free ECE policy became the sound bite in Hong Kong and concluded that this political spectacle was nothing but an artificial illusion [6]. Accordingly, Li and his team [6] concluded that the best policies should result from sensible responses to public needs, arising from debates and democratic participation rather than the outcome of political spectacle campaigns. Unfortunately, the NJ educational authorities did not take this advice and rushed forward with the universal free ECE in the city, making itself another perfect unsuccessful example. Understanding

why and how the universal free ECE policy failed in Nanjing will provide an authentic experience and good lessons for the policymakers in China and other countries.

2.2. The Practical Implementation of Free ECE in China

China has 34 provincial-level administrative regions (PLDRs), and 18 (52.9%) have decided to implement the free ECE policy, despite the theoretical debates and the central government's reservations. As shown in Figure 1, most PLDRs in western China, such as Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet, have launched the “free ECE policy for all children”. This is the most rigorous definition and the first class of “free ECE”. In addition, most PLDRs in Eastern China, such as Jiangsu, Liaoning, Guizhou, and Zhejiang, provided “free ECE for the needy families” (either in poverty or with special educational needs). This is the second class of “free ECE”, which targets helping disadvantaged families tackle the educational inequalities problem. Meanwhile, few cities have launched “free ECE in limited areas” in other PLDRs such as Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Hubei, Guangxi, Guangdong, Shanxi, and Shandong. This is the third class of “free ECE”, which aims to help the disadvantaged areas. In contrast, about 14 PLDRs (41.2%) such as Heilongjiang, Jilin, Hebei, Henan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, and Hainan, did not implement any free ECE policies. However, as the capital city of Jiangsu province, where free ECE is only provided for low-income families, Nanjing (NJ) has stood alone to provide one-year free ECE for all children since 2014. Unfortunately, this unsustainable policy was aborted in June 2022.

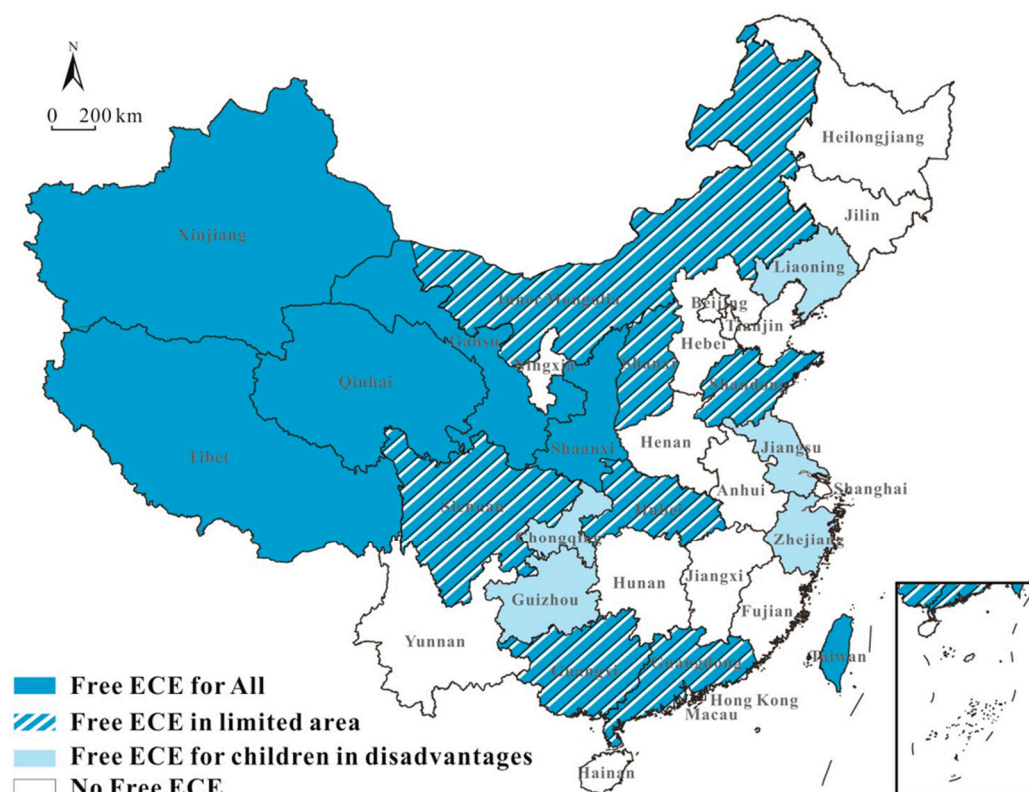


Figure 1. Enrollment Provinces Implementing Free Early Childhood Education in China, 2022. Source: Data from the websites of Local Education Bureaus in China, 2022.

Nanjing used to be the ancient capital of six old dynasties and is the capital of Jiangsu province, with its GDP ranking among the top ten cities in China. Following the national ECE reform in 2010, the local authorities launched three waves of the “Three-Year Action Plan” (“Action Plan”) to improve its ECE supply and services. In particular, NJ launched an Educational Voucher for ECE in its first Action Plan for ECE in 2011. In the second Action Plan (2014–2017), NJ moved forward to implement one-year free ECE, which means all

5–6 years old children should receive free education. NJ thus became the first capital city to implement one-year free ECE in China. Nevertheless, after the third and final Action Plan ended in 2020, the NJ educational bureau decided to terminate the free ECE policy without public or official announcement, making the case a black box. However, this “black box” does deserve empirical studies, as it provides a negative example for sustainable policy analysis. As it is important to consider all the stakeholders’ perspectives and opinions, this study will sample and survey some NJ teachers, parents, and principals to understand their perceptions and interpretations of this failure.

2.3. The Theoretical Framework of This Study

Policymaking involves value judgments that can be systematically examined by using the “policy cycle” framework [11,12]. There are five policy contexts in the policy cycle: (1) the context of influence, which refers to the context where public policy is normally initiated and/or key policy concepts are established via conflict and political debate [11,13]; (2) the context of policy text production, which refers to the creation of policy texts reflecting the prevailing discourses [12]; (3) the context of practice, which includes the discourses of how the written policy is interpreted and put into practice by local stakeholders [12,14]; (4) the context of outcomes, which refers to the context of comparing the outcomes of the policy debate to broader struggles for social change [12,13]; and (5) the context of political strategy, which refers to the context of identifying strategies to tackle inequalities [12,13,15]. As a perfect failure, the case of NJ free ECE has gone through the above five contexts, but how and why it failed, especially in the policy cycle, has not been thoroughly explored. Analyzing this critical case with the “policy cycle” framework will generate important lessons for the policymakers in China and other countries. Therefore, this study will examine the NJ case using the policy cycle framework and a mixed methods design. Additionally, the analysis will be focused on the policy trajectory, including policy formulation, implementation, response, and outcome. In particular, the following questions guided this study:

- (1) Why was the policy initiated? For the parents, the children, or society? (Context of influence)
- (2) What are the details of the NJ policy text? (Context of policy text production)
- (3) How did NJ implement the policy? (Context of practice)
- (4) What are the biggest challenges facing it? (Context of outcomes)
- (5) Why was NJ’s free ECE policy not sustainable? (Context of policy strategy)

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

This mixed-methods study has two groups of participants: (1) the participants for the survey study; and (2) the participants for the interview study. First, a complete list of the 1160 ECE administrative professionals, including kindergarten principals and teaching/research staff (TRs), was obtained from the NJ Education Bureau. We randomly sampled 20% from the list, resulting in 232 participants for the survey study. Eventually, 206 samples completed the survey, achieving a return rate of 88.8%. One hundred and seventy-seven participants were kindergarten principals (86%), and 29 were TRs (14%). Most of the participants were female (99%). Their demographic information is presented in Table 1. Second, five kindergarten principals and five TRs were randomly sampled from the 206 participants. They were invited to a structured individual interview that usually lasted between 20 to 40 min. The interviews were conducted via WeChat, as all face-to-face communications were banned during the COVID 19 pandemic.

3.2. Measure

The survey questionnaire in this study was developed based on the “policy cycle” framework. First, we conducted group interviews with six experts (two university professors, two kindergarten principals, and two TRs), consulting them about the content of this questionnaire. Their constructive suggestions were incorporated into the first draft

of the questionnaire. For example, they suggested the research team design ten to twelve questions to tap the five policy contexts. Second, a pilot study with the first draft was conducted in another city, Zhenjiang of Jiangsu Province, where people were familiar with the NJ free ECE policy. This pilot study ensured that the content and questions were valid, clear, and easy to understand. Twelve kindergarten principals and eight TRs from Zhenjiang city were recruited to fill out the questionnaire and provided feedback on the wording of the items. These items were finally revised based on their feedback to improve clarity and readability. As a result, the final version of the questionnaire consisted of two parts and ten testing items. The first part collected demographic information such as the participant's position, age, gender, and degrees. The second part includes ten questions written in Mandarin Chinese. In this study, the participants rated each item on a Five-Point-Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) within the policy cycle. Cronbach α measuring internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.87$). The KMO value was 0.729.

Table 1. Sample Information.

Criteria of the Sampling		Participants	Total Participants
Position	Kindergarten principal	177 (86%)	<i>n</i> = 206
	TR	29 (14%)	
Gender	Female	204 (99%)	
	Male	2 (1%)	
Age	Under 25	1 (0.5%)	
	25–35	55 (26.7%)	
	35–45	125 (60.7%)	
	Over 45	25 (12.1%)	
Degree	Technical Secondary School	2 (1%)	
	College	69 (33.5%)	
	Bachelor	91 (44.2%)	
	Master	43 (20.9%)	
	Ph.D	1 (0.5%)	

The interview protocol in this study was also developed from the “policy cycle” framework, corresponding to the five research questions: (1) Context of influence: why was the policy initiated? To benefit the parents, the children or society? (2) Context of Policy Text Production: What are the details of the NJ FREE ECE policy text? (3) Context of Practice: How did NJ implement it? (4) Context of Outcomes: What are the biggest challenges facing it? (5) Context of Policy Strategy: Why was NJ's free ECE policy not sustainable?

3.3. Procedure

This study was approved by the East China Normal University Ethics Review Committee (HR 554-2020) before it was conducted. All the data concerning personal information were kept secret and regarded confidential to protect participants' privacy.

First, in the survey study, we randomly selected 232 kindergarten principals and teaching/research staff (TRs) from 1160 ECE administrative professionals in NJ. The participants were invited via phone call to complete an informed consent form. Additionally, they completed the survey on WeChat, the most popular social media in China, between July to October 2021. The researcher included a brief introduction at the beginning of the questionnaire. The participants were advised that informed consent would be assumed if they completed the anonymous questionnaire, and that data would be completely confidential and only for academic analysis.

Second, in the interview study, the first author of this article interviewed the five kindergarten principals and five TRs, individually. As face-to-face communication was banned during the COVID-19 lockdown, interviews were conducted online using WeChat, China's most popular social media.

Third, the interview questions were validated via triangulation and critique before use. Responses were transcribed verbatim and coded via Nvivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software version 10 by the second author in Shanghai, China. Data saturation was reached.

Lastly, the survey data were entered and analyzed using SPSS 26 by the first author in Shanghai, China, and the results were cross-checked with the interview results. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to address the five research questions.

4. Results

The analysis of the survey and interview data were categorized and presented according to the policy cycle framework, as Figure 2 shows.

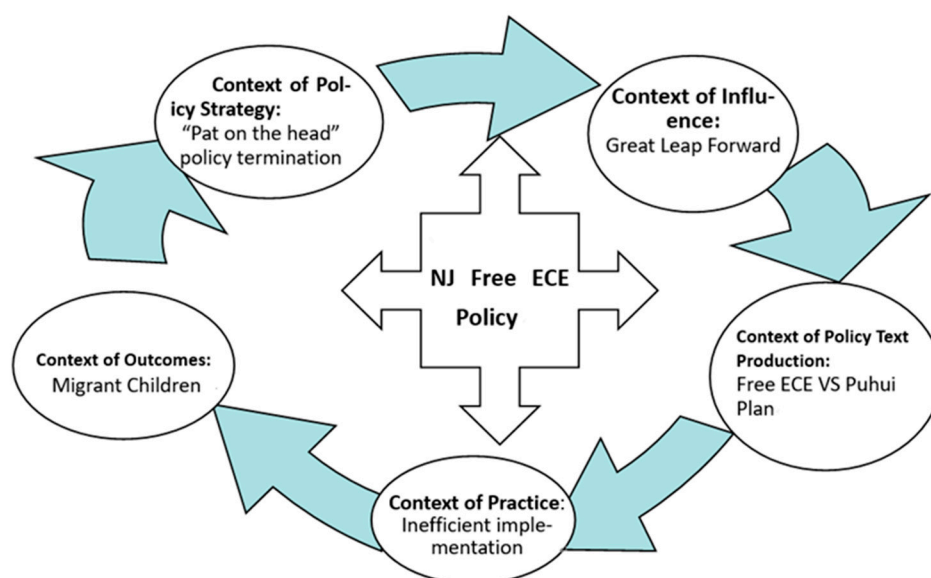


Figure 2. The policy cycle framework of NJ FREE ECE.

4.1. Context of Influence: The “Great Leap Forward” (2010–2013)

The context of influence is where “key policy concepts are established” and “policy discoursed are constructed” [9]. Why did the city of NJ initiate free ECE? The survey data demonstrated that the TRs held a less positive attitude towards the influence of free ECE. Average scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) are reported for each factor. Statistically significant differences in attitudes were reported between the kindergarten principals and teaching/research staff. As shown in Table 2, most participants (89.8%) strongly agreed that free ECE benefited the parents (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.303). However, they had different attitudes regarding whether it benefited the children (Mean of principals = 4.67; Mean of TRs = 3.52) or the society (Mean of principals = 4.77; Mean of TRs = 3.17).

The interview data indicated that two interviewees believed the free ECE policies were influenced by the west. Ms. K, a TR stated:

“Our kindergarten enrolment rate has reached 100% in 2009. The NJ municipal government still issued the Voucher Scheme since September 2011, providing 2000 RMB (\$285) to every child in kindergarten. Now is free ECE. They might borrow it from abroad.”

Some interviewers stated that the bureaucratic decision was common in many policy decisions, making the free ECE a “sound bite”. The TR, Mr. M, stated,

“The government wants to be the pioneer to the policy reform. It is important to be the first one, as a great leap forward.”

ECE services in China have witnessed a “Great Leap Forward” since 2010. To achieve the universalization of ECE by 2020 set by the central government, all levels of government in China have made great efforts to accelerate the development of ECE services during

the past decade. As Li said, the free ECE policy became a “sound bite” in nationwide debates [6]. In May 2013, Jiangsu Provincial Government put forward a goal to “achieve one-year free ECE” in 2020. As a response, NJ city proposed abandoning the voucher scheme and beginning a one-year free ECE for all children in NJ six months later.

Table 2. The Survey Results.

Item	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Average M \pm SD	M \pm SD		T	SIG.
				Principals	TRs		
Context of influence and policy text production							
FREE ECE benefits the children.	N = 134 (132; 2)	N = 1 (0; 1)	4.51 \pm 0.77	4.67 \pm 0.61	3.52 \pm 0.91	6.591	0.000 **
FREE ECE benefits the parents.	N = 185 (161; 24)	N = 0	4.9 \pm 0.30	4.91 \pm 0.29	4.83 \pm 0.38	1.1	0.279
FREE ECE benefits the society.	N = 140 (139; 1)	N = 0	4.55 \pm 0.74	4.77 \pm 0.45	3.17 \pm 0.71	11.765	0.000 **
Context of Practice and Outcomes							
Insufficient funding	N = 174 (153; 21)	N = 0	4.78 \pm 0.56	4.79 \pm 0.57	4.72 \pm 0.45	0.547	0.585
Shortage of Teachers	N = 146 (123; 23)	N = 0	4.56 \pm 0.74	4.53 \pm 0.77	4.79 \pm 0.41	−2.790	0.007 **
Shortage of Kindergartens	N = 72 (69; 3)	N = 18 (18; 0)	3.97 \pm 1.14	4.02 \pm 1.19	3.69 \pm 0.66	1.438	0.152
Workload increased	N = 140 (134; 6)	N = 0	4.64 \pm 0.57	4.76 \pm 0.43	3.9 \pm 0.72	6.221	0.000 **
Context of Policy Strategy							
I support FREE ECE in NJ.	N = 162 (141; 21)	N = 0	4.72 \pm 0.58	4.75 \pm 0.53	4.52 \pm 0.83	1.473	0.151
I support FREE ECE in China	N = 158 (146; 12)	N = 3 (0; 3)	4.67 \pm 0.73	4.8 \pm 0.47	3.86 \pm 1.33	3.772	0.001 **
I support the national Puhui Plan.	N = 122 (93; 29)	N = 0	4.43 \pm 0.79	4.34 \pm 0.82	5 \pm 0.00	−10.756	0.000 **

** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Context of Policy Text Production: Free ECE vs. Puhui Plan (2014)

The context of Policy Text Production refers to the official document and those prevailing discourses. It has a symbiotic but uneasy relation with the context of influence [12]. In this case, the enactment of policy texts relies on “commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, cooperation and (importantly) intertextual compatibility [11]” of the principals and TRs, and the local policy vs. national policy text—the Puhui Plan—which mandates that early childhood education in China should be a universal, affordable, accessible, and accountable service for all families in need [16].

On 23 April 2014, the official text entitled “Opinions on implementing one-year free ECE and promoting the Puhui and quality development of ECE” (《关于实行学前教育一年基本免费教育、促进学前教育普惠优质发展的实施意见》, “Opinions on Free ECE” hereafter) was released by the NJ Education Bureau. It was reported by multiple media and news channels as a model of educational policy reform. However, the delivery of policy texts is also bureaucratic and ambiguous. For example, a principal, Ms. Z, introduced the policy details.

“I’ve never read the official texts. I was told that the newly enrolled children in junior grade of Fall 2014 would have free education when they attended senior grade in 2016. The municipal budget has provided 6000 RMB per year for every child in Senior grade since 2016. Every child of five years old, no matter whether they were born in NJ or not, would get free education when they register in NJ kindergarten.”

Some kindergarten principals were confused by the terms “free ECE” or “Puhui” (“Puhui”). A principal, Ms. A, asked,

“Free policy means ‘Puhui’, too. Am I right?”

Some TRs pointed out the contradictory points between local policy and the national Puhui Plan. Ms. L, a TR stated,

“The second Action Plan (2014–2017) aimed to set the affordable private kindergartens into the Puhui Plan, which means that the private school must have lower profits. The Puhui Plan means a cheap fee, but not free. They are different. We do need to follow the national policy.”

The TRs and kindergarten principals were confused by the relationship between free ECE and the Puhui Plan. Importantly, the intertextual incompatibility would have inevitable consequences in the context of policy practice and outcome.

4.3. Context of Practice: Inefficient Implementation, 2016–2022

Context of Practice refers to “textual interventions into practice”, which includes discourses on how the written policy is interpreted and implemented by local stakeholders [12,13]. When asked about the details of Free ECE implementation, Ms. Q, a principal, asserted:

“All kindergartens, whether public or private, would have 600 RMB (\$92) per child every month. NJ Education Bureau would transfer the money to the school according to the number of children we reported. The parents paid the balance. For example, we were the top-ranked provincial model kindergarten with tuition fees of 720 RMB (\$111) per month, so the parents only paid the balance of 120 RMB (\$17) monthly. Most kindergartens in NJ were in Second Rank with a tuition fee of 600 RMB (\$86), so their parents paid zero. If you were in a private kindergarten, for example, the monthly tuition fee was 1600 RMB (\$229), parents needed to pay the balance, 1000 RMB (\$143).”

TRs were not directly involved in the context of practice. For example, TR K stated

“The policy was implemented smoothly, well organized. Nothing worth mentioning in practice. The ECE quality is as good as usual.”

It was strange that all the interviewed principals complained that the policy should be more efficient, which was not mentioned by the TRs. Instead, five principals mentioned that the policies had “low efficacy” and increased their workload.

“It brought much more work for us, exhausting... We had to verify every child’s qualification. That was a tedious process: the parents should register and provide us with any information, including registered permanent residence and birth certificate. If the child was not born in NJ, they should bring the local tax documents. We checked all information data and typed them into the online system, printed the list, asked each parent to sign, and sent the hard copies to the Education Bureau. It took so much time.”

(Ms. P, principal)

It seemed that the voice of kindergarten principals was not heard by any policymakers. The procedure of identity verification in NJ lasted six years until it was terminated.

4.4. Context of Outcomes: More Migrant Children (2017–2021)

As shown in Table 2, most participants shared concerns about the insufficient funding for this policy (Mean = 4.78). However, participants have different attitudes regarding whether a shortage of kindergartens was the main cause for this failure (Mean of principals = 4.02; Mean of TRs = 3.69). In addition, more principals were worried about the workload increased by free ECE implementation (M of Principals = 4.76; M of TRs = 3.9), which was verified by the interview result.

In the interview about the policy’s outcomes, a new challenge emerged. Five principals and three TRs mentioned that, since 2017, free ECE has brought more migrant children into the city, resulting in a high child–teacher ratio. Many families migrated from poorer and remote areas to NJ to receive the free ECE.

“Parents largely welcomed the policy, especially those with financial difficulties like migrant workers. The number of children attending the free ECE program in NJ increased yearly. All migrant children had the same right to access kindergartens in NJ. In 2019,

there were 200 more children on our waiting list. We have very high child-staff ratios now, more than 35 children in one Junior Grade class.” (Ms. J, principal)

The free ECE policy attracted more families from nearby cities and rural areas per year; thus, the NJ government had to provide increasing expenditures for the venture. For example, 71,961 children benefitted from free ECE in 2017, which increased to 87,214 in 2020 [17]. Mr. M was concerned about the increased funding and the overcrowded classrooms in kindergarten. He stated,

“With more migrant children floating, the local ECE budget was insufficient and challenged. We could not provide enough space and budget for them.” (TR)

The unexpected outcomes of population growth and insufficient budget, along with the textual incompatibility, have jointly made the policy short-lived.

4.5. Context of Policy Strategy: “Pat on the Head” Policy Termination (2019–2022)

As shown in Table 2, most principals supported or strongly supported the free ECE policy in NJ (82%, N = 169). While 84.5% of principals supported or strongly supported a national free ECE (N = 174), while the TRs were more supportive of the national Puhui Plan (M = 5).

Most principals supported NJ free ECE, even though their workload increased. In the interview, five principals supported the idea of national free ECE, which could not only ease the pressure of enrolment but also the procedure of the school’s free ECE report. Interestingly, the principals tended to believe that they shared the same attitude with the TRs.

“A national Free ECE could be a better idea. The migrant family don’t have to transfer if they could have free education in their hometown. I think TR’s attitude is the same.”

(Ms. J, principal)

However, the TRs held different views. For example, TR C suggested that free high school education has priority over free ECE.

“High school is more important. The Puhui Plan already benefits the parent. So why do they (the parents) still need to be encouraged?”

Four of the five interviewed TRs disagreed with free ECE. For example, TR F said that she would rather improve teachers’ welfare as a priority.

“NJ free policy is a project that benefits the parents, not ECE. If the government has extra funding, I’d prefer to raise teachers’ welfare first. It is the teachers’ salary that needs to be raised if the government has extra money.”

Again, the conflict of interests between TRs and principals is noticeable. Furthermore, the incompatibility between local and national policy has become more distinct. In 2021, the Ministry of Education, China, issued the National Action and Improvement Plan of Early Childhood Education (“the Plan” hereafter), which prioritized the development of the Puhui Plan. This Plan demands that every level of government provide “universal, affordable, accessible, and accountable” education for all needy families of young children aged 3 to 6 years [16]. Before 2025, over 85% of schools should join the Puhui Plan [18]. Therefore, the conflicts between the national Puhui Plan and local free ECE policy will affect decision making.

In 2020, the NJ free ECE was terminated without any official announcement. The TRs were the first to know. Then, the kindergarten principals in NJ were told that the free ECE would be terminated.

“I was told by phone that the kids enrolled in Junior Class in fall of 2020 would not have free education when they enter the Senior Class in 2022. The parents will be informed if they ask us. There is no official document of the termination. Why? Well ... if the parents object it ... on one wants any troubles.” (Ms. J, Principal)

When asked about their role in the policy decision process, none of the interviewees were involved in the decision of policy termination.

“No, nobody asked about my opinions. They don’t need the public opinion. Maybe they asked some TRs who have a closer relation to the Bureau or just a pat on the head. I am not sure.” (Ms. F, T/R)

The interview results indicated that the conflict of interests and the incompatibility between local and national policy might be the main cause of this policy failure. Neither the TRs nor the principals were heard or consulted during the “pat on the head” decision process.

5. Discussion

This mixed methods study found that the case of NJ free ECE might be a perfect showcase of the bureaucratic and hierarchical policy process and the “opinion-based policymaking”. Thus, its failure is inevitable, as the policy was not “evidence-based”. This section will discuss how and why it failed, using the framework shown in Figure 2.

5.1. How and Why It Becomes a Perfect Failure

The termination of the NJ free ECE policy indicated that it was not sustainable. This finding is consistent with Li’s statement that “‘sound bite’ does not work” [6]. However, how and why does this “sound bite” not work in Nanjing? The policy cycle framework could help us address this question.

First, concerning the dimensions of “the context of influence”, the policymaking process was not transparent and democratic, and the discourse did not involve frontline principals, teachers, and TRs. Instead, policymakers made their decision in the office, based on their goodwill. In a hierarchical policy cycle such as this, the voices of practitioners are rarely heard in each policy context, and the policymakers do care about the increase in practitioners’ workload. In addition, the TRs might have more authority, as they are directly affiliated with Education Bureau, working as the main mediator of policy texts, being the first to know the policy text and to inform each principal. However, most TRs in this study believed that their voices were also neglected by policymakers, as “nobody asked about my opinions”. Lacking conversation might result in resistance from practitioners, including principals, teachers, and TRs. Without their cooperation, this policy could not be successfully implemented and would never be sustainable.

Second, concerning the dimensions of “the context of policy text production” [11], there were misunderstandings and misinterpretations among practitioners and policymakers. The interviewees in this study were confused about the National Puhui Plan and local free ECE policy. The intertextuality and interpretation of the policy text is another important topic ignored by the NJ policymakers. The separated perception between different stakeholders, such as TRs and principals, would introduce conflict and resistance and influence policy strategies. Policy as discourse must redistribute “voice” [16], so the voices of more ECE stakeholders could be heard as meaningful or authoritative.

Third, concerning the dimensions of “the context of practice”, many participants agreed that insufficient funding might cause the termination of the free ECE policy in Nanjing. In policy practice, the free ECE in NJ successfully attracted children and families from nearby cities and rural areas, which was unexpected by the NJ government. They never expected and planned for the migrant children from other cities, indicating how naive and unprofessional they were. Despite the fact that financial investment in ECE tripled, going from 1.87% of the annual budget in 2010 to 6.38% in 2018, they failed to entertain the distinctly increased number of migrant children from nearby areas. Therefore, they had to terminate the bold policy or, otherwise, the municipal government would eventually face bankruptcy.

Fourth, concerning the dimensions of “the context of outcomes”, the NJ policymakers were inexperienced and unskillful. Every policy has its direction and implication; this free ECE policy is no exception. An experienced policymaker would have anticipated that this policy would attract those children from nearby cities and areas. Thus, it was a

“surprise” to the public that policymakers were “surprised” with the unexpected migrant children. Additionally, the NJ taxpayers were not satisfied with seeing more and more migrant children receive the free ECE.

Fifth, concerning the dimensions of “the context of policy strategy”, the “black box” of the NJ policy decision process needs to be open to seek public opinions before and after the policy promulgation. For example, all the interviewees agreed that the free ECE policy was for the public good, especially for the parent’s benefit. However, in the interview, it was found that neither the principals nor the TRs were involved in the policy decision process, not to mention the teachers or parents as important stakeholders. Therefore, their policy strategy should be improved.

5.2. What Lessons We Can Learn from the NJ Case

In one word, the case of NJ’s free ECE policy turned out to be a farce. Without careful planning and well-prepared strategies, the educational authorities implemented the bold policy in a rush. Accordingly, it was determined to be terminated. As Edelman indicated in his “political spectacles” theory, the public audience could only see the “political spectacle” on the stage, which is a free ECE to all and benefits the public good [8]. However, as Li, Wang, and Fong criticized, this political spectacle was nothing but an artificial illusion [6]. Perhaps, the first lesson we can learn from this failure is that the best policies should result from sensible responses to public needs arising from debates and democratic participation, rather than the outcome of political spectacle campaigns.

The second lesson we could learn from the Nanjing case might be that the sustainability of a policy is decisive to its successful implementation. This means that the financial support for the policy implementation should be sufficient and sustainable. To highlight the decisive role of sustainability, Li proposed a “3A2S” theoretical framework for ECE policy study [5]. The “3As” include “accessibility, affordability and accountability”, while the “2S” means “sustainability and social justice”. According to this ‘3A2S’ framework, every ECE policy should thoroughly consider sustainability before it is formulated and implemented [5].

The third lesson we could learn from the Nanjing case is that free ECE might not be a sustainable solution for solving the “3As” problem of accessibility, affordability, and accountability. In this case, local policy resulted in a prominent population floating between NJ and other regions and had a negative impact on social mobility, which was also observed in the case of England [19]. In particular, migrant children in NJ would face many challenges in their new living environment and confront educational inequality and psychological health issues [20]. On the one hand, the increasing numbers of migrant children led to higher child–staff ratios, resulting in lower quality interactions, lower job satisfaction, and increased work burdens for staff [21]. On the other hand, migrant children would encounter more psychological problems. Moreover, the frequent moves may lead to a constantly changing environment, which would affect migrant children’s sense of isolation and belonging [22]. The social, psychological, and emotional well-being of migrant children is essential for policymakers to consider.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

6.1. Conclusions

This mixed methods research has generated three major conclusions.

First, there were many obstacles to the policy’s sustainability, including conflict of interest, inefficient policy implementation, insufficient funding and more social inequality issues.

Second, policymakers made mistakes in the five domains of the policy cycle: the context of influence, the context of policy text production, the context of practice, the context of outcomes, and the context of political strategy.

Third, three lessons could be learned from this case: (1) the best policies should result from sensible responses to public needs arising from debates and democratic participation; (2) the sustainability of a policy is decisive to its successful implementation; and (3) free

ECE might not be a sustainable solution for solving the ‘3As’ problem of accessibility, affordability, and accountability.

6.2. Limitations

Two major limitations were found in this study. First, the sample size could have been increased to include more stakeholders. In particular, more policy stakeholders could be involved in the policy cycle analysis, such as the teachers and parents. Second, it would be perfect if a longitudinal study could be conducted to investigate the whole process of the policy cycle. Unfortunately, the current study was a cross-sectional mixed methods design and, thus, might not be able to detect the changes in the stakeholders’ views. Nevertheless, this research provides empirical evidence to support the importance of sustainability in education policymaking and the associated lessons for China and other countries.

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