



OUTCOMES OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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Abstract. *This article examines the outcomes of international cooperation in preschool education institutions in the People's Republic of China through an IMRAD-based qualitative case study. The research draws on official Chinese statistical data, UNICEF programme documents, UNESCO reports, and the external evaluation findings of the Child-Friendly Schools initiative in China. The results indicate that preschool enrollment in China increased from 50.9% in 2009 to 75.0% in 2015, 89.7% in 2022, 91.1% in 2023, and 92.0% in 2024. At the same time, the network of inclusive kindergartens also expanded significantly: in 2023, China had 236,000 inclusive kindergartens, accounting for 86.2% of all kindergartens, while the child coverage rate reached 90.8%.*

The article argues that international cooperation did not replace state-led reforms, but rather strengthened them through technical assistance, pilot models, curriculum improvement, teacher training, evaluation systems, and inclusive education initiatives. From this perspective, the transfer of Chinese experience into practice, as illustrated by the case of Tashkent Region, is of particular importance. Specifically, in April 2025, at the initiative of the Governor of Tashkent Region, a working group visited Anji, China, to study the Anji Play playground model and the developmental environment created for children in preschool institutions. Based on this experience, Anji Play experimental sites were established at Preschool Education Institution No. 12 in Tashkent district and Preschool Education Institution No. 9 in Chinaz district. Furthermore, beginning in 2025, vocational clubs were introduced in 10 state preschool education institutions in Chirchiq city

within the framework of the International Chinese Language Study Tour programme organized by the Suihua International Education Center of Guangzhou Province, China. Through this programme, children were provided with early practical exposure to such fields as art and painting, construction sets, weaving, cooking, hairdressing, medicine, sports, construction, architecture and design, robotics, carpet-making, and pottery.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the most significant outcome of international cooperation lies not merely in external financing, but in transforming tested best practices into national standards and large-scale implementation mechanisms. Both the Chinese experience and its practical application in the case of Tashkent Region confirm that international cooperation in preschool education is most effective when global practices are adapted to national policy priorities and implemented through institutional mechanisms.

Keywords: *international cooperation; preschool education; early childhood education; China; kindergarten; inclusive education; teacher training; UNICEF; UNESCO; IMRAD*

1. Introduction

International cooperation in early childhood education has become increasingly important because preschool institutions are no longer viewed only as childcare providers; they are now treated as foundational environments for cognitive, social, emotional, and health-related development. In China, preschool expansion has been dramatic over the last fifteen years. Official and partner documents show that the ratio of children attending kindergartens increased from 50.9% in 2009 to 75.0% by 2015, then to 89.7% in 2022, 91.1% in 2023, and 92.0% in 2024. In 2023 alone, China reported 236,000 inclusive kindergartens, representing 86.2% of all kindergartens, while coverage of inclusive kindergarten services reached 90.8%.¹ This expansion has been supported primarily by the Chinese state, but international

¹ <https://www.unicef.cn/en/press-releases/early-childhood-development-critical-foundation-childs-life-long-learning>

cooperation has played a visible complementary role. UNESCO's China SDG 4 mid-term review reports that from 2011 to 2020 the Chinese government allocated a total of RMB 153 billion to support central and western rural areas and remote poverty-stricken areas in expanding inclusive pre-primary education resources and improving the quality of early childhood care and education. The same report records that China's gross enrollment rate in pre-primary education rose from 75.0% in 2015 to 88.1% in 2021.²

Yet a gap remains in the literature and policy discussion. Much of the available writing focuses either on China's domestic preschool expansion or on broad child-development policy. Fewer studies isolate the concrete institutional outcomes of international cooperation at the preschool-organization level. This article addresses that gap by asking:

What measurable outcomes has international cooperation generated in Chinese preschool education institutions? It argues that the most durable outcomes can be grouped into four areas: expansion of access in disadvantaged areas, pedagogical modernization, teacher professionalization, and the gradual strengthening of inclusive preschool practices. These outcomes matter because they show how international partnerships become effective only when they are translated into standards, training systems, and implementation tools inside domestic institutions.

Methods: This article uses a qualitative case-study design and documentary analysis. The case is the People's Republic of China, selected because it combines strong state-led preschool expansion with long-term cooperation involving UNICEF and UNESCO. The documentary base includes official Chinese education statistics, the National Bureau of Statistics monitoring reports, UNICEF factsheets and press materials, UNICEF's external evaluation of the Child-Friendly Schools programme,

² chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/04/China%20SDG%204%20MTR%20Report_FINAL_ENG.pdf

UNESCO's SDG 4 mid-term review for China, and UNESCO Regional Office materials on preschool inclusion projects in Henan.³

The analysis applied four coding categories:

- (1) access and coverage;
- (2) curriculum and pedagogy;
- (3) teacher training and institutional capacity;
- (4) inclusion and support for disadvantaged groups.

Only documents containing explicit preschool-level evidence, scale indicators, evaluation findings, or institutional outcomes were prioritized. Because the study is document-based, it does not claim strict causal attribution. Instead, it identifies where international cooperation demonstrably contributed technical knowledge, pilot design, evaluation, or scale-up mechanisms that shaped preschool institutions.

Results

In April 2025, at the initiative of the Governor of Tashkent Region, a working group visited Anji in the People's Republic of China to study the activities of preschool education institutions in this area, particularly the Anji Play playground model and the developmental conditions created there for children. Based on the experience examined during the visit, two preschool institutions in Tashkent Region were selected as pilot sites for adaptation of this approach: Preschool Institution No. 12 in Tashkent district with a capacity of 450 children, and Preschool Institution No. 9 in Chinaz district with a capacity of 180 children. As a result, "Anji Play" experimental playgrounds were established in these institutions. The central idea of the Anji Play methodology is the child's natural development through free play, which supports the formation of independent thinking, creativity, problem-solving ability, and social communication skills.

³ https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202401/t20240115_1946562.html

In addition, in order to disseminate international best practices in the region, from 2025 vocational clubs were introduced in 10 state preschool education institutions in Chirchiq city within the framework of the “International Chinese Language Study Tour” programme organized by the Suihua International Education Center of Guangzhou Province, China. Within this programme, practical activities were arranged to provide children with early exposure to different professions through 11 направлений, including art and painting, construction sets, weaving, cooking, hairdressing, medicine, sports, construction, architecture and design, robotics, carpet-making, and pottery. This demonstrates that international cooperation in preschool education is not limited to the exchange of experience alone, but also contributes to enriching educational content and fostering children’s interests and practical competencies from an early age. These examples show that advanced pedagogical practices developed in China’s preschool education system can be effectively adapted and implemented in other regional educational contexts through international cooperation. This expansion was, first of all, the result of China’s active state policy. However, international cooperation also played an important complementary role. According to UNESCO’s SDG 4 Mid-Term Review for China, between 2011 and 2020 a total of RMB 153 billion was allocated to expand inclusive preschool education resources and improve the quality of early childhood education in central, western, and remote poverty-stricken areas. The same report notes that the gross preschool enrollment rate increased from 75.0% in 2015 to 88.1% in 2021. Thus, the application of Chinese preschool experience in the case of Tashkent Region confirms not only the internal effectiveness of the models developed in China, but also their strong potential for international transfer and contextual adaptation. The second major outcome was pedagogical change. UNICEF materials show that cooperation with the Ministry of Education helped move many kindergartens away from rote learning and toward child-centered, play-based learning. UNICEF reported that the child-friendly kindergarten model,

initiated in 2009 in 31 poor counties, produced resources for national use, including child-friendly kindergarten curriculum guidebooks and a storybook-based school-readiness curriculum. The same materials explain that this model helped transform rural kindergarten teaching “from traditional rote learning to the more interactive and children-focused methodology.” A related outcome was the development of national pedagogical guidance. The Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3–6 Years, finalized in 2012 with UNICEF’s full technical support, were designed to “support and strengthen implementation” of China’s preschool reform agenda and to provide teachers and families with developmentally appropriate expectations and practices for children aged 3 to 6. UNICEF later reported that the Guidelines were introduced nationally through training workshops involving participants from 34 provinces and autonomous regions, and that the UNICEF WeChat release of the Guidelines received more than 3.7 million visits in the first days after national launch. This shows that international cooperation affected preschool institutions not only through local pilots but also through national curriculum standardization and professional dissemination.⁴

The third outcome was the strengthening of teacher capacity. UNICEF’s 2017 preschool factsheet reported that its pilot projects in 332 early childhood development centres generated evidence and models that were later operationalized at scale, while its teacher-training models and strategies were incorporated into the national training programme. The same factsheet reported that in 2017 approximately 2,300 teachers improved their skills and knowledge, benefiting 56,118 children across 291 pilot child-friendly kindergartens in five disadvantaged counties.⁵ The 2024 external evaluation of UNICEF China’s Child-Friendly Schools programme further supports this result. It documents the scale of interventions

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⁵ <https://www.unicef.cn/en/press-releases/early-childhood-development-critical-foundation-childs-life-long-learning>

across multiple cycles, including work in 20 counties reaching over 350,000 children and more than 20,000 teachers during the 2006–2010 cycle, and later work in targeted quality counties. The evaluation also found that, in Sanjiang and Shule counties, 90% of trained teachers improved their capacity to design lesson plans using inquiry-based teaching methods.

These findings suggest that teacher professionalization was one of the most concrete institutional results of international cooperation. The effect was not confined to one-off workshops; it extended into training packages, guidance tools, and national teacher-support systems.

The fourth outcome was the strengthening of inclusive preschool practices. UNESCO reported that in 2019 it organized training in Henan for educational officers on disability equality and inclusive education in collaboration with the Henan Education Department. UNESCO's 2025 regional newsletter then documented a new phase of this work: a three-day Disability Equality Training workshop in Henan trained 40 multi-stakeholders involved in preschool inclusive education, with a follow-up Training of Facilitators designed to expand the pool of certified facilitators.

UNICEF's older pilot evidence also points to measurable gains for children in disadvantaged rural areas. Evaluation findings from pilot programmes in Qinghai and Yunnan showed that children receiving preschool intervention in Ledu county reached 93% of the language level and 86% of the cognitive level of peers in Xining city, while motor development in Xundian county reached 95% of the level of peers in Kunming city. Compared with rural children who did not attend kindergarten, children receiving intervention showed 37% higher sociability and 12% higher "difficulty tackling ability." Follow-up evidence also found better school performance and two-thirds less illness absenteeism among children who had attended village kindergartens.

Taken together, these results indicate that international cooperation was especially effective when focused on vulnerable groups: rural children, migrant children, poor counties, and children needing inclusive support.

The Chinese case shows that the most important contribution of international cooperation to preschool education was not external funding alone. Its deeper value lay in helping China convert global evidence into domestic institutional instruments. UNICEF described one outcome of this process as a “package of standards and teacher training materials,” while the 3–6 Guidelines were explicitly formulated to “support and strengthen implementation” of national reform. These phrases are important because they capture the real mechanism of influence: pilot, evaluate, codify, disseminate, and scale.⁶ This case also clarifies the balance between domestic ownership and international expertise. China’s preschool gains cannot be attributed primarily to external actors; the scale of expansion depended on domestic financing, governance, and political commitment. However, international cooperation added high-value functions that state systems often need: technical benchmarking, curriculum development, evaluation design, inclusion frameworks, and professional training models. In that sense, international organizations acted less as agenda-setters and more as technical brokers and institutional accelerators.

At the same time, the evidence suggests several limits. First, causality is mixed: many outcomes emerged from interaction between national policy and international support rather than from cooperation alone. Second, some programmes produced stronger evidence at pilot level than at national longitudinal level. Third, the Chinese case may not be fully transferable to countries with weaker state capacity or lower administrative coherence. Even so, one lesson is clear: international cooperation is most effective in preschool education when it produces tools that local institutions can own and scale.

⁶ <https://www.unicef.cn/en/press-releases/early-childhood-development-critical-foundation-childs-life-long-learning>

Conclusion. International cooperation in China's preschool education institutions generated four major outcomes: broader access in disadvantaged areas, modernization of curriculum and pedagogy, stronger teacher capacity, and gradual expansion of inclusive preschool practices. The evidence shows that China's preschool system moved from limited access toward near-universal enrollment, while cooperation with UNICEF and UNESCO contributed practical models, standards, training systems, and inclusive approaches that were embedded in institutional practice.⁷ The main conclusion is that successful international cooperation in preschool education should not be judged only by the number of projects signed or events held. Its real success lies in whether it changes the daily work of kindergartens, improves teacher practice, supports vulnerable children, and becomes part of the national regulatory and pedagogical system. In the Chinese case, the strongest results came precisely where international cooperation was translated into scalable institutional change.

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