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Improving Kindergarten Emotional Education Curricula for Young Children's Social Competence in the Context of Demographic Change in China

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Abstract

China is experiencing pronounced demographic change marked by persistently low fertility, rapid population aging, and frequent cross-regional migration, which is reshaping preschool education. Against this background, we examined the social-emotional competence of children aged three to six and rebuilt a kindergarten emotional education curriculum around the evidence. Using cluster sampling, we surveyed 2,586 children in 12 kindergartens of different types across eastern, central, and western China. The Social-Emotional Assessment/Evaluation Measure for children aged 36 to 72 months was revised for the Chinese context, and its reliability and validity were tested before we analyzed group differences by age, gender, caregiving arrangement, household registration, region, and parental education. The revised scale proved psychometrically sound. Children's overall competence was moderate: emotional expression and self-image were relative strengths, whereas empathy and independence lagged behind. Children raised mainly by grandparents, children holding migrant household registration, and children living in western outflow cities scored significantly lower than their peers. On this basis, we redesigned the objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation of the emotional education curriculum and piloted the revision through an eight-session thematic program. The study provides empirical grounding and a workable model for improving emotional education in a changing demographic context.

Keywords

population change, social-emotional competence, emotional education curriculum, young children, kindergarten

1. Introduction

Demographic change is among the most powerful forces reshaping public services, and preschool education in China feels its effects early. Fertility has stayed at a low level for years, the population is aging quickly [1], and cross-regional migration has become a routine feature of family life [2]. In response, recent policy has steered preschool education toward the integration of childcare and kindergarten services, closer contact between the young and the old, and the sharing of resources across institutions. Children's physical and mental health, social adjustment, and emotional development have all been written into the quality agenda for the sector. These shifts matter for a practical reason: the children who enter kindergartens today grow up in families that look very different from those of a generation ago, and the curriculum has to keep up.

The case for attending to social-emotional competence in the preschool years is well established. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs showed that participants improved in skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance relative to controls [3]. Social-emotional competence is now treated as an essential factor in promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk among school children [4]. Emotional development in the early years also underpins school readiness [5], and meaningful assessment of this competence is feasible well before formal schooling begins [6].

Yet emotional education in many kindergartens remains weak. Activities are often detached from children's daily lives, the content is thin, and there is little sense of a graded sequence from the younger to the older classes. Just as importantly, curricula rarely respond to the realities that demographic change has produced. Grandparents now provide a large share of day-to-day care in urban Chinese families [7], and migrant children frequently struggle with new surroundings and cultural adjustment [2]. Emotional education that ignores these conditions is unlikely to reach the children who need it most.

This study draws on two complementary perspectives. Ecological systems theory holds that development takes shape through interactions across nested settings, from the family and the kindergarten to the wider community and policy environment [8]. Social and emotional learning, in turn, supplies a workable account of the capacities at stake, including self-awareness, emotion regulation, social engagement, and responsible behavior [3][4]. Treating caregiving arrangement, household registration, family structure, and regional context as markers of demographic change within these nested settings, we pursued four goals: (a) to revise and validate a social-emotional assessment instrument for Chinese children aged three to six; (b) to describe the overall profile of children's social-emotional competence; (c) to examine how this competence varies across individual and family backgrounds; and (d) to redesign a kindergarten emotional education curriculum on the strength of the evidence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Development of Social-emotional Competence in Early Childhood

Social-emotional growth in the preschool years follows a fairly regular course. Between the ages of three and eleven, emotion comprehension advances through a hierarchical sequence, from recognizing external expressions to grasping mixed feelings and moral emotions [9]. Emotion knowledge in preschoolers predicts early school success, partly because it supports the self-regulatory skills that classrooms demand [10]. Closely related capacities, such as theory of mind, also consolidate during this window; a widely cited meta-analysis traced systematic age-related gains in false-belief understanding [11]. Empathy and independence tend to develop more slowly than expressive skills, because they call for sustained perspective taking and repeated practice in real settings. Girls often show a slight edge over boys in empathy and social engagement, although the gaps are usually modest.

2.2 Family and Contextual Influences under Demographic Change

Children do not develop in a vacuum, and the family contexts produced by demographic change differ in consequential ways. Grandparental care has expanded rapidly in urban China, with maternal grandmothers taking on an especially visible role [7]. The children of migrant workers, for their part, must cope with disrupted routines and the task of fitting into unfamiliar kindergartens and neighborhoods [2]. Socioeconomic resources condition the home learning environment in well-documented ways, so parental education is likely to leave a mark on social-emotional growth as well [12]. The quality of adult behavior matters as much as its quantity. Teachers who respond supportively to children's emotional expressions foster stronger emotional competence [13], and parenting programs built around emotion coaching have produced measurable gains in preschoolers' emotional skills [14][15].

2.3 Emotional Education Curricula: What the Evidence Suggests

Well-designed programs can move these outcomes. An early analysis of social-emotional curricula for young children identified a small set with credible evidence behind them [16], and the Head Start REDI project showed that enriching preschool classrooms with targeted social-emotional and language activities improved executive function and related outcomes [17]. Creative drama has also proved useful: when children act out emotional situations, they practice expression and perspective taking in a form that feels like play [18]. In China, however, preschool quality varies considerably across regions and providers [19], which means that curriculum design cannot assume a uniform starting point. Sustainable improvement also depends on partnerships among kindergartens, families, and communities rather than on the kindergarten alone [20].

3. Method

3.1 Participants

We used cluster sampling to recruit 12 kindergartens in three types of cities: an eastern city that receives net population inflow, a central city with balanced movement, and a western city experiencing

net outflow. The sample covered four sponsorship types (public demonstration kindergartens, public first-tier kindergartens, inclusive private kindergartens, and ordinary private kindergartens) and included sites in both city centers and peri-urban areas, so that the main groups served by preschool education under demographic change were all represented. Children whose ages fell outside the target range or whose questionnaires had more than 30 percent missing data were excluded, leaving 2,586 valid cases. Of these, 1,278 were boys and 1,308 were girls. The younger class (n = 862) had a mean age of 44.52 months (SD = 3.48); the middle class (n = 854), 55.06 months (SD = 3.55); and the older class (n = 870), 68.15 months (SD = 3.86). Family backgrounds spanned nuclear and extended households; three caregiving arrangements (parent-only, grandparent-only, and shared parent-grandparent care); local and migrant household registration; and four levels of parental education, from junior high school or below to a master's degree or above.

Two features of the design deserve note. We did not measure dynamic exposure variables such as duration of residence, frequency of moves, or hours of grandparent care; instead, household registration, regional type, family structure, and caregiving arrangement serve as markers of the outcome states of demographic change. The study is therefore a cross-sectional survey, and the results speak to associations rather than causal effects.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were used. The first is a locally revised version of the Social-Emotional Assessment/Evaluation Measure for children aged 36 to 72 months. We corrected the age-band deviations of the original measure and adapted it to Chinese family and kindergarten life through professional translation, back-translation, expert review, and pilot testing. The final scale retains 10 dimensions and 41 items, covering areas such as interpersonal interaction and emotional expression. The primary caregiver rated each item on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger social-emotional competence. Items were screened for cultural appropriateness, behavioral observability, clarity of wording, item-total correlations, and factor loadings; ambiguous or poorly performing items were revised or removed. Because our focus was the applicability of the revised scale in the full sample, we did not test measurement invariance across gender or age groups, a task left to later work with finer subgroup analyses. The second instrument is a self-developed family background questionnaire built around the core variables of demographic change. In pilot testing, its internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

3.3 Procedure

Before the survey, two professors of preschool education and three senior kindergarten teachers formed an expert team to guide the localization of the scale, replacing culturally specific Western expressions with material drawn from children's everyday lives. A pilot with 200 parents supported item analysis and exploratory factor analysis, after which the formal scale was finalized. With the informed consent of the kindergartens, teachers, and parents, we distributed questionnaires both online and on paper. Teachers explained the response rules to parents, and each child's primary caregiver completed the

questionnaire independently. Of 2,800 questionnaires distributed, 2,586 valid copies were returned, an effective response rate of 92.36 percent. Trained staff coded and entered the data, built the database in Excel, and checked entries repeatedly for accuracy.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, item analysis, reliability tests, independent-samples t tests, one-way analysis of variance, and correlation analysis were conducted in SPSS 26.0. Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out in AMOS 22.0 to examine the structural validity of the revised scale. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and Validity of the Revised Scale

The revised scale showed sound psychometric properties. In the confirmatory factor analysis, the chi-square statistic was 4,586.23 with 722 degrees of freedom, giving a χ^2/df ratio of 6.35 ($p < 0.001$). Because this ratio is sensitive to sample size, the remaining indices carry more weight in judging fit, and they were acceptable: NFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, and RMSEA = 0.048. Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.49 to 0.83, all significant at $p < 0.001$, and correlations among the ten latent dimensions fell between 0.40 and 0.71 ($p < 0.001$). The ten-factor structure therefore fits the data reasonably well and captures the joint yet differentiated organization of young children's social-emotional competence.

Reliability was equally satisfactory. The overall internal consistency coefficient was 0.96, and the coefficients for the ten dimensions ranged from 0.75 to 0.82, all above the conventional 0.70 benchmark. A subsample of 280 children was reassessed after three weeks; the test-retest coefficient for the total score was 0.81, with dimension-level coefficients between 0.53 and 0.69, all statistically significant. For criterion validity, the total score correlated 0.78 with teachers' professional ratings, and dimension-level correlations ranged from 0.61 to 0.75, all significant.

4.2 Overall Profile of Children's Social-emotional Competence

We divided the five-point metric into four bands: scores below 3 indicate a low level; 3 to 3.75, a moderate level; 3.75 to 4.25, a relatively high level; and 4.25 or above, a very high level. As shown in Table 1, the overall mean was 3.42 (SD = 0.38), squarely in the moderate band. The profile across dimensions was uneven. Emotional expression (M = 3.86) and self-image (M = 3.82) topped the list and reached the relatively high band, which fits the everyday observation that Chinese children are generally comfortable showing feelings and holding a basic sense of self. Empathy (M = 2.97) and independence (M = 2.89) sat at the bottom, in the low band, echoing a family culture that prizes care and protection over autonomy and gives children limited practice in reading other people's feelings. Correlations among dimensions ran from 0.40 to 0.71, and dimension-to-total correlations from 0.70 to 0.85, all positive, so the dimensions form a coherent whole even as they develop at different speeds.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Children's Social-emotional Competence by Dimension (N = 2,586)

Dimension	M	SD
Interpersonal interaction	3.51	0.41
Emotional expression	3.86	0.37
Emotion regulation	3.29	0.40
Empathy	2.97	0.45
Engagement and interaction	3.53	0.40
Self-image	3.82	0.39
Attention and activity level	3.38	0.43
Cooperation	3.45	0.42
Adaptability	3.18	0.44
Independence	2.89	0.46
Total score	3.42	0.38

4.3 Differences by Age and Gender

One-way analysis of variance revealed significant age differences in the total score and in most dimensions (Table 2). The older class outscored the middle class, which in turn outscored the younger class, consistent with the expectation that social-emotional competence accrues with age. The age gradient was steepest for attention and activity level ($\eta^2 = 0.08$), adaptability (0.05), and cooperation (0.03). Emotional expression was the exception: the three age groups did not differ significantly ($F = 1.25$, $p > 0.05$), which suggests that expressive skill develops relatively evenly across the preschool years. For emotion regulation and independence, the older class scored significantly higher than the middle and younger classes, while the latter two did not differ, pointing to a slower developmental rhythm and arguing for deliberate cultivation in the earlier years.

Table 2. Differences in social-emotional competence across age groups

Dimension	F	p	η^2	Pattern
Total score	32.56	<0.001	0.04	Older > Middle > Younger
Interpersonal interaction	18.23	<0.001	0.02	Older > Middle >

Dimension	F	p	η²	Pattern
Empathy	15.68	<0.001	0.01	Younger Older > Middle > Younger
Attention and activity level	89.42	<0.001	0.08	Older > Middle > Younger
Emotional expression	1.25	>0.05	—	No significant difference

Gender differences were also clear (Table 3). Girls scored significantly higher than boys on the total score ($t = 5.86$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$), a small-to-medium effect. Girls led on six dimensions, with the largest gaps in empathy ($d = 0.28$) and engagement and interaction ($d = 0.27$), a pattern consistent with girls' earlier attunement to others' emotions and their greater involvement in social play. Emotional expression and self-image were among the four dimensions on which the two groups did not differ.

Table 3. Differences in Social-emotional Competence by Gender

Dimension	t	p	Cohen's d	Pattern
Total score	5.86	<0.001	0.23	Girls > Boys
Empathy	7.23	<0.001	0.28	Girls > Boys
Engagement and interaction	6.89	<0.001	0.27	Girls > Boys
Cooperation	6.54	<0.001	0.25	Girls > Boys
Self-image	1.36	>0.05	—	No significant difference

4.4 Differences by Caregiving Arrangement, Household Registration, Region, and Parental Education

The environmental markers of demographic change were all associated with children's scores (Table 4). Children raised by parents alone scored highest ($M = 3.65$), followed by those in shared parent-grandparent care ($M = 3.41$); children raised mainly by grandparents scored lowest ($M = 3.18$), and the differences were significant ($F = 42.36$, $p < 0.001$). Empathy was the only dimension on which caregiving arrangement made no significant difference. Children from nuclear families also outperformed those from extended families on the total score and most dimensions. In extended households, divergent child-rearing ideas between generations and fragmented companionship time

appear to dilute the quality of emotional support.

Household registration showed a similar pattern. Children with local registration scored significantly higher than children of migrant families on the total score ($t = 4.23$, $p < 0.001$), with the clearest gaps in emotional expression, self-image, and engagement and interaction. Migrant children must adjust to new surroundings and find their place among unfamiliar peers, and this adjustment burden seems to weigh on their emotional and social development. Regional type mattered as well: children in the eastern inflow city scored highest ($M = 3.55$), ahead of the central city ($M = 3.42$) and the western outflow city ($M = 3.28$), with independence and adaptability especially weak in the west. These gaps track the uneven distribution of preschool resources across regions.

Table 4. Differences in Total Scores by Caregiving Arrangement, Household Registration, and Region

Variable	Group	M	F/t	p
Caregiving arrangement	Parent-only care	3.65	42.36	<0.001
	Shared care	3.41		
	Grandparent-only care	3.18		
Household registration	Local	3.50	4.23	<0.001
	Migrant	3.32		
Region	Eastern inflow city	3.55	26.79	<0.001
	Central balanced city	3.42		
	Western outflow city	3.28		

Parental education showed a steady gradient (Table 5): children of parents with a master's degree or above scored 3.72, followed by a bachelor's degree (3.48), an associate degree (3.35), and junior high school or below (3.20), with significant differences overall ($F = 35.42$, $p < 0.001$). Fathers' education was more closely tied to children's emotion regulation and adaptability, whereas mothers' education related more strongly to self-image and interpersonal interaction. Better-educated parents tend to invest more in companionship and emotional guidance, and their children appear to benefit accordingly.

Table 5. Differences in Total Scores by Parental Education

Parental education	M	F	p	Pattern
Master's degree or above	3.72	35.42	<0.001	Significantly higher than other groups

Parental education	M	F	p	Pattern
Bachelor's degree	3.48			Higher than associate degree and below
Associate degree	3.35			Higher than junior high school or below
Junior high school or below	3.20			Lowest

5. Redesigning the Emotional Education Curriculum

The findings above give a clear directive: empathy and independence are the weak points, and grandparent-raised children, migrant children, children in western cities, and children of less-educated parents are the groups most in need of support. Curriculum improvement therefore cannot rest on general principles. We rebuilt the objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation of the emotional education curriculum around these targets and piloted the revision through "Little Emotion Managers," an eight-session thematic program in an older class. This work remains a design study with preliminary classroom practice rather than a controlled trial, so the aim here is to lay out the construction logic and usable pathways, not to demonstrate intervention effects.

5.1 Objectives that Respond to Group Differences

The curriculum takes its bearings from core competencies and organizes objectives along three lines: cultural foundations, independent development, and social participation. Under cultural foundations, children learn to recognize common emotions in their outward expression and inner feeling, acquire usable regulation strategies, and practice the etiquette of expressing emotions in social situations. Under independent development, children learn to notice their own emotional states, work through negative feelings with concrete strategies, and build a positive sense of self. Under social participation, children practice sensing others' emotions and interacting with peers and elders. The sequence respects developmental pacing: the younger class emphasizes emotion recognition and basic expression, the middle class turns to regulation and early social skills, and the older class concentrates on empathy and social adaptation. Layered objectives then address specific groups. For grandparent-raised children, we added goals around appreciating elders' efforts and communicating feelings across generations; for migrant children, goals around settling into a new kindergarten and making overtures to unfamiliar peers; and for only children, goals around sharing, turn-taking, and simple perspective taking.

5.2 Content Embedded in Real-life Scenarios

The content integrates three modules: emotion cognition, emotion regulation, and social interaction. In the first module (sessions 1 to 2), children create emotion face charts from their own experiences at home and in the kindergarten. Migrant children work through "my emotion map," which helps them sort out the feelings that moving has stirred up, while grandparent-raised children practice reading their

grandparents' emotions, anchoring emotional learning in the lives they actually lead. The second module (sessions 3 to 4) turns to regulation. Children assemble a personal regulation notebook, collecting strategies such as deep breathing, talking to someone, and quiet time alone, and they take part in an intergenerational activity that brings grandparents into the kindergarten. In "our emotion agreement," children and grandparents work out together how to cool down and speak up when conflicts arise.

One case illustrates how this works. Child A, a boy raised mainly by his grandmother, often clashed with her because he could not express his needs well, and his regulation skills were weak. At first he could not say why he was angry or how to put his thoughts into words. The teacher guided him to draw his "angry face" in the regulation notebook and to recall a real episode: "I wanted to keep playing with the blocks, but they were put away." During "our emotion agreement," he and his grandmother settled on a rule: take three deep breaths first, then say what you want. The same technique was kept up at home as a parent-child extension. Later observation showed that when conflict arose, he began trying the breathing strategy on his own and started voicing his needs in words; quarrels with his grandmother became noticeably fewer. The case suggests, at least tentatively, that an abstract strategy can be turned into a behavior a five-year-old can actually perform, and it offers a practical answer to the weak regulation skills we found among grandparent-raised children.

The third module (sessions 5 to 8) builds social interaction through role play and creative drama, a format with demonstrated value for social-emotional learning [18]. To work on empathy, children acted out "what should I do when a classmate is sad," taking turns as the upset peer and the comforter and practicing listening and consoling gestures. To strengthen independence, children completed tasks on their own, such as keeping up their regulation notebooks and telling grandparents what they needed. For migrant children, a "welcome, new friend" activity used introductions and toy sharing to rehearse social entry.

5.3 Implementation Through Collaboration

Implementation draws on the kindergarten, the family, and the community working in concert. Whole-group teaching uses games, simulations, and small-group cooperation so that children meet emotional skills in a relaxed form rather than as lecturing. A calm-down corner, stocked with emotion cards, comfort objects, and quiet picture books, gives children a place to self-regulate whenever feelings run high. Family guidance is differentiated: parents in parent-only households are encouraged toward high-quality emotional companionship; grandparent households receive suggestions for smoother intergenerational communication, which connects with evidence that adults' responses to children's emotions shape competence [13] and that guided parent programs can improve it [14][15]; and migrant families are supported in building security and adapting to the new setting. Community platforms for intergenerational activities extend the curriculum beyond the kindergarten gate, in line with the partnership model of home, school, and community [20]. Teacher development ran alongside: training helped teachers assess social-emotional competence, spot individual differences, and

individualize their guidance, and a network across kindergartens of different regions and types let teachers share practices for the problems that demographic change has brought to their classrooms.

5.4 Evaluation Focused on Growth

Evaluation tracks development rather than ranking children. Teachers record emotional expression and social behavior in daily observation; children's themed artwork, their chosen regulation strategies, and their behavior over time are analyzed qualitatively to judge progress and locate difficulties. The evaluation brings together teacher assessment, child self- and peer assessment, and feedback from parents and the community, and it concentrates on the core dimensions of empathy, independence, emotion regulation, and interpersonal interaction. What matters is observable change in real situations: a child who spontaneously comforts a classmate, one who applies a regulation strategy without prompting, one who joins a new group quickly. Results feed straight back to teachers and parents, so that content and arrangements can be adjusted in a continuing cycle of research, practice, evaluation, and refinement.

6. Discussion

The survey portrays a generation of preschoolers whose social-emotional development is on track in aggregate yet uneven underneath. Children express feelings and know themselves reasonably well, but empathy and independence trail behind. This asymmetry makes developmental sense. Emotion comprehension and emotion knowledge consolidate earlier, as the literature on hierarchical emotional understanding would predict [9][10], whereas empathic responding and autonomous coping require sustained perspective taking and real-life rehearsal. A child-rearing style heavy on protection gives children fewer of those rehearsals. The gender pattern, with girls ahead on empathy and engagement, accords with what we know about early social development, and the absence of an age gap in emotional expression suggests that expressive skills reach a workable level early and then hold steady.

The environmental findings carry the sharpest implications. That grandparent-raised children scored lowest, while shared-care children fared better, indicates that the issue is not grandparents' presence but the reduced involvement of parents and the friction between generations' child-rearing ideas; the rapid rise of grandmother-led care in urban China makes this a mainstream concern rather than a marginal one [7]. The migrant disadvantage, concentrated in expression, self-image, and engagement, fits what is known about the adaptation costs of relocation [2], and the east-to-west gradient echoes documented disparities in preschool quality across China [19]. The parental education gradient, finally, is consistent with long-standing evidence on socioeconomic resources and child development [12]. Each of these gaps is, in principle, addressable by a curriculum that sets differentiated goals, works through real-life scenarios, and enlists families and communities; the broader effectiveness of structured social-emotional programs gives reason for optimism on that score [3][16][17].

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The design is cross-sectional, so the group differences are associations, not effects. We captured the outcome states of demographic change rather than dynamic

exposures such as duration of residence or hours of grandparent care. Measurement invariance across gender and age groups was not tested, and all child data came from caregiver report, which teacher or observational measures could usefully complement. The curriculum component, finally, is a design study with preliminary practice; its effects await testing with pre-post measurement and comparison groups.

7. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of low fertility, population aging, and routine migration, this study revised a social-emotional assessment instrument for Chinese children aged three to six, surveyed 2,586 children in 12 kindergartens, and mapped how social-emotional competence varies with age, gender, caregiving arrangement, household registration, region, and parental education. Overall competence was moderate, with emotional expression and self-image as strengths and empathy and independence as weak points; grandparent-raised children, migrant children, and children in western outflow cities were the most disadvantaged groups. On this evidence, we rebuilt the emotional education curriculum's objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation and piloted the revision in a thematic program. Later research should track children longitudinally, test the curriculum with controlled designs, verify measurement invariance across subgroups, and extend the sample to more regions, so that emotional education can better serve children's social development in a changing demographic context.

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