

Theoretical Foundations, Practical Dilemmas, and Implementation Pathways for the High-Quality Development of Inclusive Childcare Services

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Abstract: Advancing the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services is an essential response to public well-being needs and a key lever for promoting long-term, balanced population development. Building on the five dimensions of the New Development Philosophy—innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing—this paper systematically clarifies the theoretical foundations of high-quality development for inclusive childcare services under new demographic conditions. Guided by the core principles of high-quality development, it further examines the practical dilemmas currently facing inclusive childcare services across supply, service delivery, and management, including resource shortages and supply-demand imbalances, a weak workforce and uneven professional capacity, as well as incomplete institutional arrangements and unclear allocation of authority and responsibilities, together with their underlying causes and mechanisms. On this basis, the paper proposes a four-dimensional coordinated set of implementation pathways spanning resource support, workforce development, quality oversight, and technology-enabled innovation, providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for addressing population-development challenges and building a modern childcare service system that is both inclusive and high-quality.

1. Introduction

Amid major demographic shifts in China, inclusive childcare services for children under age three have been positioned as a central policy lever to support fertility and reduce families' childrearing burdens. Strengthening service quality is not only responsive to concerns about family wellbeing; it also underpins broader goals related to high-quality demographic development. Since 2019, national policy has progressively clarified this agenda through a series of guiding documents. The State Council's 2019 *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Childcare Services for Children Under Three Years Old* established overall requirements, key tasks, and implementation arrangements for the sector.^[1] The 2022 *Guiding Opinions on Further Improving*

and Implementing Active Fertility Support Measures, jointly issued by the NHC (National Health Commission) and 17 other departments, further emphasized expanding the inclusive childcare service system and increasing service availability.^[2] Most recently, the 2025 *Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of an Inclusive Childcare Service System* proposed a “1+N” network—anchored by comprehensive childcare service centers and involving multiple providers—to deliver services that are accessible, affordable, and supported by quality safeguards.^[3] This policy evolution reflects a gradual shift toward collaborative governance, a turn from rapid expansion to quality improvement, and a move from pilot initiatives to more systematic institutionalization. In practice, however, tensions persist: the public-welfare orientation of inclusive provision can clash with profit incentives;^[4] workforce shortages coexist with uneven professional quality;^[5] and standards, roles, and accountability arrangements remain underdeveloped.^[6] Together, these constraints continue to limit equitable access and service quality. Meanwhile, the literature has tended to prioritize policy design^[7] or localized implementation cases,^[8] leaving gaps in system-level theorization and empirically grounded pathways for high-quality development. Against this backdrop, the present study conceptualizes high-quality development in inclusive childcare services, identifies key implementation bottlenecks, and proposes feasible strategies, with the aim of informing responses to China’s stage-specific demographic challenges.

2. Conceptualizing high-quality development in inclusive childcare services amid demographic change in China

In this study, “high-quality development” extends the idea of quality beyond narrow performance indicators. It foregrounds a quality-first orientation, calls for balancing expansion with service quality, and emphasizes efficiency in the use of resources.^[9] Rather than a fixed benchmark, it is best understood as a multidimensional process of sustained improvement across innovation, coordination, sustainability, openness, and sharing. Applied to inclusive childcare services, this framework offers a coherent way to link macro-level development principles with sector-specific practices in provision and governance. More specifically, the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services comprises five mutually reinforcing dimensions. Innovation refers to building an innovation system that covers service philosophy, governance arrangements, the use of technology, and service content and delivery,^[10] enabling adaptive change and continuous improvement. Coordination highlights internal coherence within the service system and alignment with demographic trends and social development, thereby improving system performance. Sustainability (green development) integrates environmental considerations and intergenerational equity into facility development, provider operations, and care practices, while also securing stable investment and a sustainable workforce pipeline.^[11] Openness emphasizes multi-actor participation by government, private providers, and families in a collaborative governance network that supports both resource sharing and appropriate competition. Sharing focuses on institutional guarantees—especially resource allocation and subsidy mechanisms—to improve equity of access and accessibility. Under this conceptualization, high-quality development means integrating these five dimensions throughout the design and operation of the inclusive childcare service system. Doing so helps align inclusiveness with quality, responds to families’ demand for high-quality childcare, and provides an analytical foundation for building a modern system that is accessible, affordable, and supported by quality safeguards.

3. Practical dilemmas and mechanisms shaping high-quality development in inclusive childcare services amid demographic change in China

Inclusive childcare services are widely regarded as an important policy lever for longer-term

demographic sustainability. Yet, in practice, constraints cluster around three linked areas: the availability of resources, the organization of service delivery, and provider operations and governance.

3.1 Supply-side constraints: shortages and structural imbalances

The high-quality development of inclusive childcare services is constrained by two related problems: an overall shortage of provision and structural imbalances between supply and demand. In terms of aggregate capacity, by July 2025, Yinchuan had 221 registered childcare institutions with approximately 14,000 childcare slots, equivalent to 4.0 slots per 1,000 population for children under the age of three.^[12] Despite this expansion, the share of inclusive (public-interest) provision accessible to families remains low, and existing capacity still falls short of the rapidly rising demand for childcare places among infants and toddlers.^[13] Financing pressures further intensify these constraints. Moreover, the absence of a stable and continuous local fiscal subsidy mechanism, coupled with limited participation by private capital, places inclusive childcare institutions under substantial long-term operational pressure, making it difficult to achieve economies of scale. Structural issues are also evident in the spatial distribution of provision. Inclusive childcare resources display marked geographic concentration alongside persistent urban–rural disparities. Higher-quality inclusive resources, together with more standardized care services and supporting facilities, are concentrated in urban districts such as Xingqing District and Jinfeng District, whereas county-level administrative areas and rural communities continue to experience shortages. Registration records as of June 2025 show that about 72 percent of Yinchuan’s registered childcare institutions are located in Xingqing, Jinfeng, and Xixia Districts, while county areas account for only 28 percent. Moreover, county-level provision is dominated by small private providers, which typically offer relatively few inclusive (public-interest) places and have limited service capacity.^[14]

3.2 Service-delivery constraints: a fragile workforce base and uneven professional capacity

A well-prepared childcare workforce is foundational to the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services and is closely linked to the care and development of infants and toddlers.^[15] Currently, shortages of practitioners and uneven professional capacity continue to hinder improvements in the quality of inclusive provision. On the one hand, workforce development faces structural shortages and high turnover, leaving providers struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff.^[16] A key factor is the relatively low social status and limited recognition of childcare work, which discourages graduates from relevant university programs from entering the field and weakens the talent pipeline.^[17] As a centre director noted, “We have been trying to recruit qualified practitioners, but it is difficult to retain well-qualified staff. Training opportunities are limited, and pay is not sufficient to attract long-term workers.” This points to limited institutional support—particularly in training opportunities and compensation—which undermines providers’ ability to attract and retain professional staff. On the other hand, practitioners’ professional skills remain uneven, with notable gaps in competencies related to infant-toddler care and early development support. Although the sector has a pressing need for such competencies, pre-service training remains underdeveloped, making it difficult for higher education institutions to meet the demand for highly skilled, practice-oriented childcare practitioners required for the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services.^[18] In addition, inclusive providers often lack a structured in-service professional development system, which restricts practitioners’ opportunities for continuous growth and, in turn, limits further improvements in service quality.^[19]

3.3 Governance constraints: underdeveloped systems and blurred departmental responsibilities

An effective, well-institutionalized governance system is essential for the stable operation and sustainable development of inclusive childcare services.^[20] In practice, inclusive providers continue to face two related difficulties: an underdeveloped governance and standards framework, and unclear departmental mandates and responsibilities.^[21] First, the quality standards framework for inclusive childcare remains lagging, and enforcement by relevant departments is often insufficient, thereby weakening support for the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services. Existing standards largely emphasize access requirements—such as facilities and health and safety—yet offer limited scientifically grounded and practically workable guidance on the standardization of inclusive services and the developmental appropriateness of care and support for infants and toddlers.^[22] At the same time, oversight is largely reliant on a single supervisory body, which limits the provision of regular, professional inspections as well as ongoing guidance. As a result, standards implementation and quality monitoring are often insufficient to ensure the quality of inclusive provision. Second, departmental mandates remain poorly defined, and interdepartmental coordination does not function smoothly in practice. Because an effective cross-departmental coordination mechanism has not been fully established, functional boundaries remain blurred and information sharing lags behind. Consequently, in the processes of entry approval and regulatory assessment for inclusive providers, responsibility is frequently passed between departments and standards are applied inconsistently,^[23] increasing providers' institutional transaction costs and compliance burdens.

4. Practical pathways for the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services amid demographic change

Amid demographic change, advancing the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services in Yinchuan is both a core requirement of improving public well-being and an important support for long-term, balanced population development.^[24] Accordingly, progress requires coordinated action across four pathways—resource provision, workforce development, quality governance, and technology-enabled support—to build a more systematic enabling framework.

4.1 Building a multi-layered system for resource support and service provision

Establishing a multi-layered, efficient system of resource support and service provision is a key pathway toward the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services.^[25] First, resource allocation and integration should be strengthened by aligning the roles of government, the market, and social actors. With integrated childcare service centers serving as hubs, provision can be better aligned with local needs, while existing resources in preschool education, community services, and health care are mobilized.^[26] Cost pressures can be eased through shared use and re-use of facilities and services. In parallel, big data and artificial intelligence can be leveraged to develop a digital management platform, supporting the digital transformation of provider operations and governance. Second, the roles of relevant departments and the broader market environment should be further clarified and standardized. Government should enhance transparency throughout policy formulation, implementation, and oversight—particularly in provider registration (record-filing) and the allocation of fiscal subsidies—to ensure procedural fairness and improve the effectiveness of public-private collaboration.^[27] In addition, by clarifying access standards and strengthening quality assessment and credit-based regulation, private investment can be guided to enter the sector in a regulated and orderly manner. This approach can stimulate innovation and improve service quality

while safeguarding minimum requirements for safety and quality, strengthening whole-process oversight during and after entry, and maintaining a fair and well-ordered competitive environment. Third, fiscal support and cost-sharing mechanisms should be improved. This includes establishing a dedicated development fund for inclusive childcare, refining a differentiated operating-subsidy scheme tied to service quality, and using arrangements such as publicly built, privately operated models and performance-based awards in lieu of subsidies to leverage broader social resources.^[28] At the same time, support for families should be strengthened through instruments such as childcare subsidy vouchers and child-rearing allowances to ease household childcare burdens. Ultimately, these measures aim to form a cost-sharing mechanism jointly borne by government, providers, and families.^[29]

4.2 Strengthening workforce training and career development for the childcare sector

Moving inclusive childcare services from expansion in coverage to excellence in quality depends fundamentally on building a well-qualified, professional, and stable workforce.^[30] First, a standardized career development system should be established. This includes setting clear, competency-based entry requirements and improving rank-based appraisal and promotion arrangements, thereby forming a more consistent framework for professional competency certification and career progression.^[31] Second, a systematic mechanism for capacity building should be developed. Efforts should start upstream to expand the pipeline of well-prepared entrants and institutionalize regular in-service continuing education. Through structured and diversified training modalities, practitioners' professional competencies and hands-on skills can be strengthened on an ongoing basis.^[32] Third, sustained incentives and supportive measures should be implemented by improving compensation and benefits for practitioners. Dedicated awards and development funds can recognize outstanding staff, strengthening the occupation's attractiveness and workforce stability.^[33] Fourth, a fertility-friendly social environment should be actively fostered. Through policy guidance, public communication, and civic education, fertility support policies can be translated into shared social norms and everyday practices, gradually building a life-course support environment.^[34] Over time, this can help consolidate social consensus around the value of childcare work and strengthen practitioners' professional pride and social recognition.

4.3 Improving quality oversight and establishing a long-term mechanism for continuous improvement

A well-functioning, institutionalized system of quality oversight is a key safeguard for safe provision and sustained quality improvement in inclusive childcare services.^[35] It also provides institutional support for the high-quality development of inclusive childcare services. First, a coordinated cross-departmental oversight mechanism should be established, with mandates and accountability clearly aligned. At the departmental level, the government should take overall responsibility for coordination, with the Health Commission leading the division of roles and responsibilities among relevant agencies to enable joint, multi-stage oversight.^[36] At the territorial level, oversight responsibilities should be clearly allocated between city- and county-level authorities through a tiered accountability arrangement with vertical coordination, ensuring that oversight requirements are implemented effectively. Second, a multi-stakeholder social oversight network should be developed to enable whole-process, dynamic oversight from entry to exit. This includes strictly enforcing establishment standards and strengthening registration (record-filing) review. Digital tools (including "Internet+" approaches) can be used to support remote inspections, and a clear, rules-based exit procedure should be put in place for providers that fail to meet assessment requirements.^[37] In parallel, an industry credit-rating system should be promoted, with

providers graded against core indicators such as safety, quality, and staffing. Rating results should be linked to fiscal subsidies and other incentive measures, forming an “assessment-feedback-rectification-improvement” cycle of continuous improvement.^[38] In addition, broader social participation in oversight should be encouraged by disclosing information on provider ratings, credit status, and service quality, and by incorporating parent feedback and third-party professional evaluations to enhance the objectivity and credibility of oversight. Third, information disclosure and policy communication should be strengthened. Policy interpretation can be improved through mass media communication and the dissemination of effective practices from more advanced regions, providing families with credible guidance when choosing services. At the same time, trade unions, women’s federations, and other community-based organizations can be mobilized for community outreach to enhance public awareness and trust,^[39] thereby reinforcing the social foundations for effective oversight and fostering a supportive social climate.

4.4 Innovating childcare models through technological empowerment

Driving the digital transformation and systemic restructuring of inclusive childcare services is a strategic path to break through traditional limitations and achieve high-quality development.^[40] First, AI- and data-enabled practice innovation should be advanced. By leveraging artificial intelligence and visual analysis technologies, early development data for infants and toddlers can be regularly collected on a routine basis and systematically analyzed to enable early risk alerts regarding health status and more individualized, precise assessments. Second, the technical foundations for healthcare–childcare integration should be strengthened.^[41] Formal partnerships between healthcare institutions and childcare providers can be promoted, using approaches such as remote guidance and health-data sharing to extend evidence-informed parenting guidance and professional health services. By reducing geographic constraints, these arrangements can help mitigate shortages of high-quality healthcare–childcare resources in rural and remote areas and promote more equitable access to basic public services.^[42] Third, technology-enabled models for workforce development should be introduced. VR/AR tools can be used to create high-fidelity virtual simulation training environments, allowing practitioners to repeatedly rehearse critical skills—such as emergency handling—in safe and controlled scenarios, thereby improving training outcomes and professional competence.

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