Review of Research on "Boarding Kindergartens"

Wang Daifen

Yuxi Normal University，Yuxi Yunnan，653100；

Abstract: Boarding schools are a product of China's urbanization and large-scale structural adjustments in rural education. While they have garnered significant scholarly attention with fruitful research outcomes, studies on boarding kindergartens remain comparatively underdeveloped. Current limitations include:Narrow research scope, with insufficient coverage of regional variations and diverse demographic groups;Methodological homogeneity, lacking interdisciplinary integration and theoretical innovation;Insufficient depth, particularly in empirical studies.As the ancient adage states: "All principles trace back to beginnings; all phenomena arise from a single point." A century of human life is built upon early learning—the importance of early childhood education is self-evident. Thus, future research should:Focus on regional and group-specific differential studies, advancing interdisciplinary and digital transformation research;Examine daily life practices of boarding children, deepening studies on affective education and family-institution collaboration;Enhance teacher development and care-education quality, promoting integration of childcare services and policy effectiveness evaluation.Collective efforts are essential to provide high-quality boarding experiences for young children.

Keywords: Boarding kindergarten；Early childhood；Research review

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1 Research Background

Boarding schools are an inevitable outcome of China's urbanization and large-scale structural adjustments in rural education. The Outline for Building a Stronger Education System (2024–2035) emphasizes that by 2035, China will establish itself as an education powerhouse, requiring "optimized distribution of primary/secondary schools and kindergartens" and "enhanced operational conditions and management standards for boarding institutions"[1]. This underscores that "China's path to national rejuvenation must begin with quality preschool education" [2].While boarding schools and their students are well-researched topics in academia, studies focusing specifically on kindergartens remain scarce. A precise keyword search for "boarding system" in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database and China Master's Theses Full-text Database (from 1949 to 2024) yielded 1,887 articles (including 2 doctoral dissertations and 408 master's theses). Among these, only 36 addressed "kindergartens" (including 2 master's theses), accounting for merely 2%. Expanding the search to "boarding young children" added 8 master's theses, totaling 44 publications. This reveals a predominant focus on compulsory education stages—particularly rural boarding primary/secondary schools [3]—with minimal attention to early childhood.In China, boarding kindergartens operate as full-care or hybrid models. This review does not distinguish between them, collectively terming them "boarding kindergartens" or "boarding centers." As a unique component of preschool education, boarding kindergartens warrant greater scholarly attention. Thus, analyzing existing research on these institutions and their impact on children is a logical step toward safeguarding boarding children's well-being.
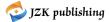
2 Current Research on Boarding Kindergartens

Existing studies primarily explore three dimensions, focusing on environment-individual interactions, resource optimization, and educational efficacy to derive improvement pathways from micro-level behaviors.

2.1 Research on the Impact of Boarding on Child Development

2.1.1 Effects on Competency Development

Self-Care Skills: Studies concur that boarding fosters independence. Cao Qin notes "boarding kindergartens leverage

temporal-spatial resources, facilities, and educational advantages to cultivate self-care abilities"[4]. Ren Juying similarly observes enhanced self-reliance[5], while Wang Wenfeng's questionnaire reveals "boarding children outperform day students in self-care skills" [6].Social Adaptation: Xu Lili's analysis using the Infant-Junior High School Social Competence Scale and Social Anxiety Scale for Children indicates "boarding children score significantly higher in overall social adaptation, socialization, and self-management"—though with elevated anxiety[7]. Zhao Xiaoting further confirms "superior social skills among boarding children" with noted gender differences[8].Self-Regulation: Song Tianjiao et al. find no significant gap in peer relationships or self-control between boarding/day children. However, peer acceptance strongly correlates with self-regulation in senior kindergarten boarders, highlighting peer influence[9].

2.1.2 Effects on Emotional Well-being

Research consistently identifies emotional and mental health concerns:Sun Lei's analysis of children's drawings reveals "weakened parental attachment and ambiguous family concepts among boarders"[10].Zhu Yuhang's family dynamic drawings show "negative emotions toward family members and strained parent-child relationships in full-care boarders" [11].Scholars warn of "severe deficits in familial bonding" [12], "elevated psychological stress" [13], "restricted emotional autonomy", and "impaired emotional control" [14].He Jing's qualitative study of three adolescents' boarding experiences identifies "direct impacts on parent-child relationships and boarding-related distress, triggering derivative emotional issues" [15].Countermeasures: Researchers urge prioritizing mental health support [16]. Bai Yan asserts "appropriate interventions can effectively mitigate emotional risks" [17]. Recommendations include:Creating "nurturing, autonomy-supportive emotional environments";Attending to individual emotional needs;Enhancing teacher-child bonding through role-playing [14];Helping children "learn to love while experiencing love" [18].

2.2 Research on Management and Care-Education in Boarding Kindergartens

2.2.1 Institutional Management

Kindergarten management entails organizing, coordinating, and administering institutional affairs, where effective practices are prerequisites for high-quality care-education services. "Safety first" is the universal principle in boarding schools, resulting in tightly scheduled routines with strictly supervised morning/evening study sessions[19]. Li Jianhua emphasizes that "cultivating healthy habits in boarding children is a core institutional responsibility" [20], necessitating special care strategies in management[21]. Establishing daily routines is critical—Song Nana's action research on dining, sleep, toileting, and hygiene activities developed context-specific protocols[22].

2.2.2 Curriculum Development

Jia Yuzhen designed age-specific educational models integrated with family/community resources by tracking emotional fluctuations across morning/daytime/evening periods[23]. Yao Jieru created a "Calendar-Based Curriculum" using festivals to foster positive moods[24]. Xu Jing developed rich socio-life curricula[25], while Zhang Xuehong constructed a self-care competency curriculum through action research on eight daily activity segments and peer interactions[26].

2.2.3 Activity Design

To address evening separation anxiety, Xie Lingjuan proposes:Relaxed psychological environments;Engaging evening activities;Diverse experiential programs [27].Given prolonged family separation, activities should integrate:Familial bonding education[28];Enhanced environments and teacher training;Innovative pedagogy [29];Strategies for social skill cultivation [30].Zhou Nianli affirms caregivers' pivotal role in emotional regulation and proposes implementation approaches [31].

2.3 Research on Children's Boarding Life and Recommendations

2.3.1 Children's Boarding Experiences

Boarding life encompasses all elements and interactions sustaining children's daily reproduction, including spatiotemporal arrangements, dietary, sleep, recreational, and learning activities [32]. Limited studies exist:Sun Yajuan & Li Shanze's critical ethnography reveals "suboptimal living conditions in rural boarding kindergartens, hindering physical-mental harmony" across temporal, spatial, and atmospheric dimensions[33].Zhang Xu's ethnography on urban-village boarders depicts life as "orderly yet monotonous"—meeting basic needs but impeding holistic development [32].He Jing's longitudinal interviews with three adolescents highlight "enhanced independence but relational deficits due to

unaddressed challenges" during/after kindergarten boarding [15].Parental co-residence even occurs in pastoral boarding centers, reflecting systemic gaps [34].

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Research remains divided on boarding's value [35]:Proponents cite benefits for socialization, self-reliance, and parental labor liberation;Critics equate it to "high-end orphanages", urging avoidance unless unavoidable [36].Nuanced Stance: As "one man's meat is another man's poison", He Jing argues against blanket prohibition—boarding may trap "the privileged" yet rescue "the optionless" [15]. Echoing Sukhomlinsky's maxim: "No boarding school, however elite, can replace a mother."Mitigation Strategies:Parents should prioritize virtual communication and companionship;Establish a government-society-kindergarten-family collaborative framework [37];Transform boarding life into "nurturing, warm experiences."

3 Research Gaps and Future Directions

3.1 Limitations of Existing Studies

Current research on boarding kindergartens, while yielding preliminary insights, faces significant constraints: limited publications (predominantly by frontline teachers rather than university researchers), overreliance on experiential reports, underdeveloped theoretical frameworks, and minimal coverage in high-impact journals.

1. Narrow Research Scope with Inadequate Regional/Demographic Coverage

Studies predominantly treat "boarding children" as homogeneous subjects, focusing on competency/emotional impacts and management strategies while neglecting individual agency and daily life practices.Geographically, research concentrates on affluent regions (e.g., Shanghai, Dongguan), overlooking underdeveloped central/western areas and rural contexts—particularly ethnic minority communities (e.g., Yunnan).Vulnerable groups (left-behind/disabled children) lack targeted intervention studies.

2. Methodological Monoculture and Interdisciplinary Deficits

Quantitative approaches (scales/questionnaires) dominate, with scarce qualitative or mixed-methods designs.Insufficient integration of psychological, sociological, or anthropological perspectives, e.g., cross-cultural comparisons of cultural identity or social adaptation.

3. Superficial Empirical Foundations

Emotional Education: Despite noting reduced parent-child interaction, studies lack systematic analysis of affective compensatory mechanisms or evidence-based interventions.Teacher Quality: While highlighting staffing shortages and high turnover, research fails to empirically examine teacher competency frameworks, training efficacy, or incentive structures.Policy Implementation: Claims about "integration of childcare services" lack longitudinal evaluations of fiscal efficiency, equitable resource allocation, or urban-rural disparities.

3.2 Future Research Trajectories

China's boarding kindergartens originated during the Anti-Japanese War in Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, with broader recognition emerging after Soong Ching-ling established the China Welfare Foundation Nursery in Shanghai (1949)[38]. Despite historical evolution, academic engagement remains disproportionate to institutional prevalence. Public confusion persists—many parents inquire "Is primary school inaccessible without kindergarten attendance?" during research surveys. Critical questions demand exploration:Parental Decision-Making: Will informed choices still favor boarding given its trade-offs?Cost-Benefit Dilemma: Does enrolling in "elite kindergartens" justify boarding's developmental risks?Strengthening research requires greater involvement of university scholars to enhance publication rigor and impact.

1. Prioritizing Regional/Group-Specific Studies with Interdisciplinary and Digital Integration

Investigate cultural adaptability and resource gaps in central/western rural and ethnic minority boarding centers.Develop customized models for left-behind/disabled children, aligning with the State Council's Guidelines on Rural Small-Scale and Boarding Schools [39], which discourages boarding for grades 1–3 and repurposes closed campuses for preschool education.Address systemic challenges:Optimal rural kindergarten distribution;Quality assurance for boarding

care-education;Mental health safeguards;Special needs education;Teacher development;Stakeholder engagement.Advance interdisciplinary convergence (e.g., applying attachment theory in psychology and life course theory in sociology) to decode boarding's multidimensional socialization effects.Pioneer digital transformation via AI-assisted emotional education platforms to strengthen psychological support networks.

    2. Centering Children's Daily Practices and Emotional-Familial Synergies

Reject homogenizing children as "collective objects"—recognize their agency as 3–6-year-old individuals with cognitive capacities and decision-making autonomy. As cautioned: "Group analysis necessitates individual lenses; societal shifts emerge from personal needs and behaviors" [40]. Key inquiries:How do children actively construct boarding lives amid unfamiliar settings?Do they exercise agency through "subtle resistance" to shape positive experiences?How do they navigate relational dynamics with parents, teachers, and peers?What adaptive strategies inform their present/future educational trajectories?Innovative Solutions:Design "familialized curricula" (e.g., virtual parent-child interactions, "family accompaniment days");Develop theoretical models for affective compensation;Evaluate long-term impacts of teacher-led emotional substitution.

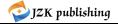   3. Elevating Teacher Quality and Policy Effectiveness

Establish teacher competency frameworks examining salary incentives and professional identity.Create child development indices (cognitive/social/emotional) for dynamic quality monitoring.Integrate 0–6 childcare-education systems through unified curricula and teacher training.Quantify policy efficacy, e.g., measuring universal kindergarten coverage contributions to urban-rural equity.

4 Conclusion

Attending to children's holistic well-being is both a moral imperative and an educational necessity. Future progress hinges on: differentiated research, rigorous policy evaluation, and digital innovation—collectively advancing theoretical and practical scaffolding for dignified boarding experiences.

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Author: Wang Daifen (1990－), female, native of Wenshan, Yunnan, M.A., Lecturer. Research interests: Sociology of Education.]