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An Exploration of Strategies for Workforce Development in the Childcare Sector in the Guizhou Region

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Abstract: With the full implementation of the three-child policy, the provision of childcare has become a key public welfare initiative. The realization of the goal to ensure the well-being of the children is contingent upon the support of a professionalized childcare workforce. Located in western China, Guizhou's childcare sector started relatively late, The weakness of teaching workforce has become the core bottleneck constraining the high-quality development of regional childcare services. This paper first defines the core connotation of childcare services and analyzes the multifaceted value of workforce development for the operation of institutions, the healthy growth of infants and toddlers, and broader social well-being. Drawing on the current state of the childcare workforce in Guizhou, the paper identifies three core issues: an insufficient supply of qualified professionals from academic institutions, the workforce's current transitional and developmental phase, and the absence of a regularized mechanism for in-service professional training. To address these challenges, the paper proposes targeted development strategies from three perspectives: establishing a robust pre-service training system, vigorously enhancing the workforce's capacity for transitional development, and formulating a scientific in-service training plan. The aim is to provide a theoretical and practical framework for cultivating a stable, professional, and sustainable childcare workforce in Guizhou, thereby contributing to the development of a province-wide, inclusive childcare service system.

Keywords: Childcare Services; Workforce Development; Continuing Professional Development

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, "ensuring childcare for young children" has been incorporated into key tasks for safeguarding and improving people's livelihoods. As a western province, Guizhou started late in developing childcare services, has a weak foundation, and faces a particularly acute shortage of teaching staff. Based on this, this article analyzes the main issues in teacher training based on the actual situation in Guizhou, and proposes a strategy that integrates pre-service, transition, and post-service training, aiming to provide a reference for the construction of an inclusive childcare service system.

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDCARE SERVICES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILDCARE WORKFORCE

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF CHILDCARE SERVICES

The period from birth to age three is the most critical stage of human development. During this phase, infants and toddlers exhibit a vigorous metabolism, and their brains and nervous systems undergo rapid development. The foundations for secure attachment, language acquisition, curiosity, and cognitive abilities are all established during this time. Consequently, scientific, meticulous, and consistent care, coupled with early guidance, directly shapes the trajectory of a child's lifelong development. UNICEF defines 'childcare services' as 'the care and education services for children aged 0-3, provided outside the home by individuals, groups, or institutions' [1]. Distinct from early childhood education for children aged 3-6, childcare services are centered on nurturing, with education serving a supplementary role. These services integrate a multitude of functions, including daily care, nutritional feeding, disease prevention, emotional soothing, early development guidance, and parenting support for families. They encompass a diverse range of models, such as public childcare centers, private daycare facilities, nursery classes within kindergartens, community-embedded childcare, and home-based childcare providers. As the core agents in the delivery of these services, the professional competence of childcare educators directly determines the quality of care provided. They are, therefore, the linchpin for addressing the challenges of 'inaccessible and substandard childcare' in Guizhou.

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2.2 The Importance Of Workforce Development For The Childcare Sector

2.2.1 A High-Caliber Childcare Workforce Can Significantly Enhance The Quality Of Childcare Institutions.

The quality of the teaching staff is the core competency for the survival and sustainable operation of childcare institutions. Currently, Guizhou is home to over 700 registered and filed childcare institutions, with private providers accounting for approximately 80% of the total. This has led to intense, homogenized competition within the sector, where the primary factor for parents when selecting a provider is the professionalism of the caregiving staff. A systematic staff development and training program can standardize the institution's caregiving protocols and formalize procedures across the entire operational workflow—including feeding, sleep, play, and safety and protection. This mitigates safety and service-related risks, such as bumps and bruises, improper feeding, and a lack of emotional soothing, thereby reducing operational disputes. Furthermore, a robust training system can establish a clear career progression pathway, addressing the prevalent pain points of high staff turnover and attrition rates in Guizhou's childcare sector, and thus fostering a more stable teaching team. A professional and well-trained staff can also independently design tiered, developmental activities tailored to infants and toddlers aged 0-3. This enables the creation of differentiated and distinctive services, which in turn boosts parental satisfaction and the institution's reputation, increases the utilization of affordable, inclusive childcare slots, helps the institution achieve sound and sustainable operations, and promotes the standardized and regulated development of the regional childcare industry.

2.2.2 A Professional Early Childhood Care And Education Workforce Can Significantly Foster The Holistic Physical And Mental Development Of Infants And Toddlers.

In contrast, family caregivers without professional training are prone to various pitfalls, such as excessive doting, permissive or neglectful supervision, and the premature academic instruction (rote teaching of knowledge beyond the child's developmental stage). These practices can easily lead to a lack of a secure sense of self, delays in motor development, and underdeveloped social skills in young children.

2.2.3 A Well-Developed And Qualified Childcare Workforce Is The Cornerstone Of Ensuring That All Young Children Have Access To Quality Care And Education.

Developing a professional childcare workforce is a foundational initiative for achieving the public welfare goal of 'ensuring the well-being of the young,' optimizing the demographic structure, and promoting social equity. From the perspective of supporting childbirth, a robust childcare workforce system can provide affordable, high-quality care services, alleviating the childcare burden on dual-income families, enabling women of childbearing age to enter the workforce, and mitigating the work-childcare conflict for women in Guizhou. This, in turn, helps to foster a more supportive regional environment for childbearing and boosts the willingness to have children [2]. From the perspective of human capital development, professional early childhood care can narrow the early development gap for infants and toddlers between urban and rural areas and between affluent and low-income families. It promotes educational equity and enhances the overall caliber of the province's population from the ground up. From a social governance perspective, high-quality childcare institutions rely on a professional workforce to conduct parenting workshops and provide in-home childcare guidance. This helps disseminate evidence-based parenting knowledge to families, transform traditional and less-refined parenting concepts, reduce the conflicts arising from intergenerational caregiving, and alleviate internal family conflicts. In the long run, a mature and stable childcare workforce system can strengthen the network of inclusive and affordable childcare services, address the shortfalls in public welfare in the western region, and advance the development of a fertility-friendly society [3].

3 Analysis Of The Main Issues In The Development Of The Childcare Workforce In The Guizhou Region

3.1 The Number Of Childcare Professionals Trained By Formal Educational Institutions Is Insufficient To Meet The Actual Needs Of The Sector.

Formal academic education within colleges and universities serves as the primary channel for the supply of childcare professionals. However, the current enrollment capacity of childcare-related programs across various institutions in Guizhou Province is insufficient to meet market demand. As of 2024, 21 institutions in the province offer childcare-related programs, with an actual enrollment of 4,689 students in 2023. Concurrently, a total of 69 secondary vocational schools (including the secondary vocational departments of higher vocational colleges) offer programs in fields such as infant and toddler care and maternal and infant care, enrolling approximately 900 students annually, thereby cultivating a substantial number of specialized professionals for the province's early childhood education sector [4]. Nevertheless, with the total number of childcare slots in the province projected to reach 177,000 by the end of 2025, and in accordance with national standards for childcare services, the required caregiver-to-infant/toddler ratio must average 5:1—with even higher ratios required in certain specialized care settings. Consequently, the existing 28,900 full-time childcare practitioners are insufficient to meet this staffing requirement, and there remains

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a significant shortage of specialized, high-caliber professionals. The primary reasons for this situation are as follows:

First, the childcare-related majors were established relatively late, with limited enrollment scales. For a long time, most higher vocational colleges and preschool teacher training institutions in the province focused on education for children aged 3-6, and specialized programs for 0-3 childcare only began to be gradually added after the release of the new vocational education catalog in 2021. These programs have a short history and limited enrollment quotas. Some institutions offer only elective courses or a few specialized courses, without forming an independent and complete curriculum system for childcare [5]. Second, the integrated training model combining medical care and education has not been fully implemented. Childcare work involves multiple disciplines, including pediatric nursing, infant nutrition, and early childhood education, but many institutions still follow traditional preschool education curricula. Medical-related courses such as health care, infant first aid, and growth and development assessment account for a low proportion, and there is a lack of medical teaching staff and on-campus or off-campus medical training facilities. Third, industry-education integration is insufficient. The cooperation between some institutions and local childcare centers remains superficial, with insufficient internships and practical training periods, and a lack of stable school-enterprise training bases. Students mainly master theoretical knowledge on campus, lacking hands-on caregiving experience. As a result, graduates often require re-training by institutions after taking up positions, leading to low talent-job fit [6]. Fourth, regional distribution is unbalanced. Childcare-related programs are mostly concentrated in urban areas such as Guiyang, Zunyi, Tongren, and Bijie, while childcare resources in county-level areas are relatively scarce, causing local graduates to flow toward central cities.

3.2 The Existing Childcare Workforce Is in a Transitional and Developmental Phase.

Affected by insufficient talent supply, the childcare industry in Guizhou Province is currently in a stage of rapid expansion alongside efforts to improve quality and standardization. The overall quality of the existing childcare workforce is transitioning from being "uneven" to "professionalized." Specifically, this is manifested in the following aspects: First, the professional backgrounds of childcare workers are diverse, and their professional compatibility is insufficient. At present, the scale of pilot training programs for childcare-related majors in secondary and higher vocational schools across the province is limited, and most practitioners have not received systematic or professional training. Among them, preschool teachers who have transferred to childcare roles habitually apply the 3–6 age-group teaching model, which leads to confusion between the core logic of childcare and early childhood education in practice. Some exhibit a cognitive bias that overemphasizes "teaching" while neglecting "caregiving," resulting in insufficiently targeted childcare services. While domestic workers and maternity matrons who have transitioned into this field are skilled in daily infant care, they lack capabilities in early childhood development guidance, emotional intervention, and professional home–institution communication, all of which require gradual transition. Second, there are shortcomings in professional competence. Most grassroots practitioners have not participated in systematic special training on professional ethics, teacher conduct, and infant safety protection. Some lack sufficient patience, overlook individual developmental differences in infants, and have weak safety prevention awareness. They struggle to accurately identify early developmental issues such as developmental delays or psychological anxiety, and their professional judgment and intervention capabilities are insufficient. Such practitioners need to supplement their knowledge of education and psychology. Third, there is a clear urban–rural gradient in skill levels. Branded childcare institutions within the province have gradually established systematic internal teacher training mechanisms, leveraging school–enterprise cooperation and the resource support of provincial and municipal childcare comprehensive service platforms to achieve regular skill upgrades for in-service staff. In contrast, small privately run childcare providers in counties and townships, despite having participated in inclusive skills training through multiple departments and channels — which has helped them fill gaps in basic caregiving and safety protection — still show significant shortcomings in systematically designing scientific parenting activities and providing refined parenting guidance to families. The degree of service standardization still needs further improvement. All of these factors call for the transformation and development of the childcare workforce.

3.3 A Standardized and Integrated Post-Service Training System Has Yet to Be Established.

Post-employment training is an important pathway for in-service nursery teachers to continuously enhance their professional competence. At present, the post-employment teacher training system in Guizhou Province's nursery industry is still in the stage of construction and improvement, and a normalized and integrated training network covering all urban and rural nursery institutions has not yet been established. Training resources in some regions exhibit fragmented distribution characteristics, and there remains a significant gap in the supply of high-quality training for small grassroots nursery points in counties and townships. A few non-inclusive short-term training programs are not closely aligned with the needs of frontline positions, and there is still a clear gap in building a unified standardized post-employment training system across the entire industry. First, there is a lack of planning for normalized unified training. Currently, Guizhou Province has not yet established an annual normalized rotation training system covering the entire nursery industry. Existing training is mainly dominated by phased special public welfare lectures, and a long-term training system targeting different position levels has not been established. Second, the effectiveness of training is insufficient. Training for the nursery industry generally takes the form of online theoretical lectures and policy briefings, while the proportion of hands-on practical training sessions, such as on-site observation, care scenario

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simulation, and one-on-one home parenting guidance, is relatively low. This makes it difficult to cover the complex operational details in frontline nursery scenarios and fails to effectively solve the practical problems encountered daily by grassroots care staff. Third, there are still shortcomings in the balanced allocation of training resources between urban and rural areas. Core training resources such as high-quality industry experts and standardized practical training bases are mainly concentrated in the provincial capital Guiyang and central cities at the prefecture level. Nursery practitioners at the county and township levels bear high transportation and time costs to participate in offline training in central cities, and some remote counties with limited transportation conditions have not yet achieved normalized coverage of practical training. Fourth, the closed-loop management mechanism for training outcomes is still incomplete. Training participation and skill assessment results have not been fully incorporated into the assessment systems for practitioners' professional title evaluation, salary adjustment, and job promotion, resulting in insufficient intrinsic motivation for practitioners to actively participate in training. Most training programs have not yet established normalized post-training follow-up visits or effectiveness verification procedures, leading to low efficiency in the implementation of training content and making it difficult to support the long-term sustainable development of the teaching workforce.

4 Effective Strategies For The Professional Development Of The Childcare Workforce In The Guizhou Region

4.1 Establishing A Comprehensive Pre-Service Teacher Education System

4.1.1 Improving The Curriculum For Training Early Childhood Care And Education Professionals In Higher Education Institutions.

Based on the childcare talent demand in the Guizhou region, we will restructure the integrated training program for childcare professionals across associate and bachelor's degree levels, fully implement the core training model that combines medical care with childcare and integrates nursery with kindergarten education, and address the shortage of talent supply from educational institutions. First, we will expand the scale of childcare-related programs in provincial universities. This includes supporting cities such as Guiyang, Tongren, and Zunyi to increase enrollment in the Infant and Toddler Care Services and Management program, and vigorously promoting qualified institutions to add undergraduate programs in childcare to fill the gap in training high-level childcare professionals. For cities and prefectures with significant childcare talent shortages, we will encourage local vocational colleges and universities to offer childcare programs or extend early childhood education to include a childcare track, thereby cultivating childcare practitioners tailored to county-level needs. Second, we will restructure the curriculum to integrate medical care with childcare. By breaking down the disciplinary boundaries between education and medicine, we will establish three core curriculum modules: the medical care module (covering infant and toddler nutrition, nursing care for common childhood illnesses, and first aid for accidental injuries), the childcare education module (covering developmental psychology for ages 0-3, responsive caregiving, and early play design and guidance), and the comprehensive practice module (covering family parenting guidance, childcare institution operations, and collaborative education involving families, institutions, and communities). Pediatricians from maternal and child health hospitals, as well as experienced childcare center directors, will be invited to jointly participate in curriculum development and teaching. Third, we will implement the "1+X" certificate system, making qualifications such as infant caregiver, nursery teacher, and senior guide mandatory requirements for graduates of these programs. Students will complete vocational skill level certification while still in school, enabling them to obtain their certificates and start working immediately upon graduation.

4.1.2 Enhancing The Comprehensive Competencies Of Higher Education Students Majoring In Childcare

To address the weakness of college students' overemphasis on theory over practice and their lack of skills in guiding interactions with 0-3-year-old infants, efforts should comprehensively strengthen students' integrated abilities in childcare teaching and parenting guidance. First, it is essential to shift the traditional mindset of preschool education, clarify that the core of childcare is "parenting first, development second," and offer specialized courses to distinguish 0-3-year-old childcare from 3-6-year-old preschool education. Training should focus on students' abilities to recognize infant signals, soothe emotions, support individualized development, and conduct observation and assessment, avoiding rote knowledge transmission. Second, tiered teaching simulation and practical training should be carried out. On-campus virtual childcare simulation rooms should be established, with simulated caregiving scenarios set up by month-age groups to train students in practical skills such as complementary food preparation, burping and lulling to sleep, body massage, and game design. Simulated cases targeting infants of different ages and developmental levels should be used to cultivate students' ability to design differentiated care plans. Third, a skills competition platform should be built. Provincial education and health authorities should hold an annual vocational skills competition for childcare students, with events covering first aid, infant development assessment, and parent-child activities, to promote learning and training through competition and push students to refine their teaching and caregiving skills. Meanwhile, intercollegiate teaching observations and demonstration lesson exchanges should be organized to share high-quality childcare teaching cases and broaden students' professional horizons. Finally, capacity building for home-kindergarten co-parenting guidance should be strengthened. Specialized courses such as home-kindergarten communication and scientific parenting advocacy should be offered, with simulated scenarios covering multi-child families, dual-income families, and grandparent-led caregiving. Students should be

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trained to provide personalized parenting guidance tailored to the family structure characteristics of Guizhou's local context [7].

4.1.3 Strengthening The Skills Training For Students Majoring In Early Childhood Care And Education In Higher Education Institutions.

Construct a three-stage practical teaching system of "daily training + short-term probation + long-term post internship" to address the weak practical abilities of students majoring in childcare in Guizhou, and open up the talent delivery channel between colleges and the industry. First, the school regularly carries out practice week activities on campus. Each semester, at least 2 weeks of intensive practical teaching are arranged, during which basic skill training such as feeding, touching, first aid, and game guidance is completed at the on-campus childcare training base, with one-on-one on-site guidance from medical staff and childcare center directors. Only after passing the basic skills assessment can students proceed to off-campus probation. Second, short-term off-campus probation is carried out in stages. Starting from the sophomore year, students are arranged to go to childcare institutions 1-2 times a month for short-term probation, transforming theory into practice based on the course content they have learned; in the junior year, students are organized to visit registered formal childcare centers to observe the full process of full-day care, half-day care, and parent-child care, record the care points for infants and toddlers of different ages, and write probation observation reports. Third, a post internship system of no less than 6 months is implemented. The school-enterprise order-based cultivation model is promoted, with colleges signing internship cooperation agreements with childcare institutions inside and outside the province, uniformly assigning internship positions, and providing dual guidance from on-campus professional mentors and frontline teaching staff at the institutions; the internship content covers daily care of infants and toddlers, prevention and nursing of common diseases, organization of early childhood activities, parenting classes for parents, and institutional safety management, etc. At the end of the internship, the institution issues a practical ability evaluation, which serves as a core graduation assessment indicator. Combined with the "1+X" certificate system, this will greatly enhance the practical skills of students majoring in childcare.

4.2 Substantially Advancing The Transformation And Development Of The Childcare Workforce

First, establish a tiered and categorized retraining framework. Leveraging the 21 higher education institutions within the province that offer programs in early childhood care and education, we will scale up targeted retraining for preschool and domestic service professionals transitioning into the childcare sector. A dedicated "Specialized Training Module for 0-3 Year-Old Childcare" will be introduced to rectify the tendency among former preschool teachers to prioritize academic instruction over practical care, and to address the shortfalls in early development guidance and home-center communication skills among professionals transitioning from the domestic service sector. This will rapidly close the supply gap for formally trained professionals. Second, supplement the specialized training curriculum with modules on professional competence. Core subjects such as infant and toddler safety and protection, early childhood development screening, and professional ethics and conduct will be incorporated as mandatory courses for all childcare practitioners. A repository of practical, case-based skills will be established to enhance practitioners' assessment and intervention capabilities through scenario-based simulations, thereby reinforcing the foundational standards of safety and professionalism in childcare services from the ground up. Third, promote the extension of high-quality training resources to the grassroots level. By leveraging provincial and municipal comprehensive childcare service centers, a collaborative "Center-Outreach-Satellite Point" mechanism will be established. This will involve organizing core instructors from reputable childcare institutions to conduct regular on-site training in rural and remote areas. Practical courses, such as the design of standardized, science-based parenting activities and home-based parenting guidance, will be delivered directly to childcare centers at the county and township levels. This initiative will reduce the time and travel costs for practitioners at the grassroots level to participate in training, and will facilitate a steady transformation of the teaching workforce from being 'inconsistent' to becoming fully professionalized.

4.3 Formulating A Scientifically-Grounded Post-Service Professional Development Plan For Teachers.

4.3.1 Provide A Variety Of Training Methods.

To address the challenges posed by the dispersed geographical distribution of childcare practitioners in Guizhou's urban and rural areas and the logistical difficulties of in-person training, a diversified, post-service training model will be established, integrating both online and offline components and featuring a tiered, categorized structure. Leveraging the provincial Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Hospital and the Health Commission, free online childcare courses will be offered, covering modules such as policies and regulations, infant and toddler care, activity design, and family-based parenting guidance, thereby supporting practitioners in their self-directed, flexible learning at any time. Regular live-streamed Q&A sessions will be conducted, inviting pediatricians and childcare experts to provide real-time solutions to frontline caregiving challenges. Offline, a three-tiered training system will be implemented: intensive pre-service training for new recruits; quarterly skills enhancement training for current practitioners; and annual operational management training for childcare administrators. To further reduce participation costs for grassroots-level staff, regional in-person training bases can be established in central cities, and mobile outreach training programs will be conducted in remote cities and prefectures to deliver instruction directly to the field. Concurrently, immersive, hands-on training will be introduced, with MCH hospitals and model childcare centers hosting on-site practicums. These practicums will employ methods such as simulated operations, case study discussions, and on-site job shadowing to enhance the practical, hands-on skills of the trainees.

4.3.2 EMPHASIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING

Abandon formalized training, focus on solving practical frontline work problems, and establish a whole-process effective control mechanism for training. First, a needs assessment is conducted prior to training. This involves gathering feedback from practitioners on their professional challenges through methods like questionnaires and focus groups, allowing the training content to be customized on demand and avoiding one-size-fits-all, irrelevant courses. Second, the mix of training content is optimized. Hands-on, practical training sessions must account for no less than 60% of the curriculum, reducing purely theoretical instruction and focusing on case studies tailored to the high-frequency, real-world challenges in Guizhou. Third, a robust assessment and follow-up mechanism is established. After each training session, a dual assessment covering both practical skills and theoretical knowledge is conducted. Those who do not pass are required to retake the training. A follow-up visit is conducted three months post-training to verify that the teachers have applied the newly acquired skills in their daily caregiving practices. Finally, a shared repository of training resources is created. This repository compiles high-quality practical videos, activity lesson plans, and parenting guidance manuals, and makes them freely available to all childcare institutions across the province. This initiative aims to enhance training efficiency and ensure the training genuinely contributes to improving the quality of care.

5 CONCLUSION

Educating when young to cultivate uprightness is the foundation of sagehood. Childcare for ages 0–3 is the starting point of national education and the guarantee of people's livelihood. Childcare teachers are the core force in safeguarding the healthy growth of infants and young children and realizing "childcare for all." The construction of the teaching workforce is the key support for Guizhou's childcare services to transition from "having access to childcare" to "providing quality childcare." In response to the prominent problems in the current Guizhou region, such as insufficient supply of professional talents, the incumbent workforce being in a period of transformation and development, and the lack of normalized and integrated post-service training, this paper proposes: laying a solid talent foundation by constructing a pre-service training system; promoting workforce transformation through stratified job-transfer training; and ensuring sustainable development through scientific post-service training plans. Only by interconnecting and coordinating these three aspects can we build a childcare teaching workforce that is sufficient in number, reasonable in structure, and professionally stable. However, teacher training is a systematic project that still requires multi-party collaboration among government departments, colleges and universities, childcare institutions, families, and society. Continuous efforts must be made in policy guarantees, funding investment, industry-education integration, and urban-rural balance to build a high-quality childcare teaching workforce.

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