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Establishing a Student-Centered University-Government-Kindergarten Collaborative Education System

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Abstract

In response to the strategic demand for "high-quality early childhood education" in the new era, the training system for early childhood teacher candidates (TCs) in universities is undergoing a profound transformation from "scale expansion" to "quality enhancement." The traditional University-Government-Kindergarten (UGK) collaborative model has fallen into a state of collaborative inertia due to issues such as fragmented objectives, ambiguous responsibilities, and loose interactions, making it difficult to meet the requirements for cultivating high-quality early childhood teachers. Drawing on interorganizational relationship theory, this study systematically elucidates the applicability and guiding value of this framework for resolving collaboration challenges. It explicitly proposes establishing a student-centered UGK collaborative education system, whose core lies in achieving "quadruple coordination" of roles, optimizing "bidirectional interaction" of relationships, and innovating "trust-building mechanisms." Subsequently, the paper outlines a four-pronged pathway for system construction—targeting objectives, institutional frameworks, resource allocation, and student engagement—aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical frameworks for deepening reforms in China's preschool education teacher preparation model and establishing a dynamic, sustainable collaborative education ecosystem.

Keywords

Early Childhood Teacher Education, UGK Collaboration, Student Perspective, Interorganizational Relationship Theory

1. Introduction

High-quality teachers are the backbone of high-quality education development.

In April 2022, the Ministry of Education and seven other departments jointly issued the “Plan for Strengthening the Teacher Workforce in Basic Education in the New Era,” marking a new phase in China’s teacher education reform. In the process of comprehensively advancing educational modernization, efforts are focused on revitalizing teacher education, deepening reforms of the teaching workforce in the new era, and achieving the goals outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan and the long-term vision for 2035. “Quality First” has become a core principle of the New Era Basic Education Teacher Strengthening Plan. Preschool teachers, as a vital component of the high-quality teaching workforce, play a significant role in achieving high-quality educational development. A series of documents, including the “Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Deepening Reform and Standardizing Development in Preschool Education” and the “Action Plan for Enhancing Preschool Education Development during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period,” repeatedly emphasize the core objectives of “improving collaborative education mechanisms,” “deepening reforms in training models,” and “promoting in-depth cooperation between kindergartens and universities.”

This series of policies points to a clear imperative of our times: How can we build an efficient, collaborative, and sustainable talent development system within an educational ecosystem involving multiple stakeholders, to meet the public’s urgent expectation of advancing from “access to early childhood education” to “access to high-quality early childhood education”? As the cradle for training preschool educators, the quality of teacher preparation in university early childhood education programs directly impacts the future of China’s preschool education sector. For a long time, universities, governments, and kindergartens—the three core entities in talent cultivation—have coexisted within the educational sphere, establishing preliminary consensus and practices for cooperation. However, they have yet to form a deeply integrated, highly synergistic organic whole. The current UGK collaborative education model frequently encounters “cooperation dilemmas” due to fragmented goals, ambiguous responsibilities, and loose interactions (Sun, 2023; Luo, 2021). This fragmented and superficial collaboration leads to significant mismatches between talent supply and demand, with the shortage of high-quality teachers becoming one of the bottlenecks constraining the high-quality development of preschool education.

To overcome this bottleneck, it is imperative to transcend the single-subject perspective and introduce a more integrative and explanatory theoretical framework. Interorganizational Relationship Theory (IRRT), which focuses on the dynamic processes of resource exchange, power interactions, goal negotiation, and structural coupling among different organizations (Dyer & Singh, 1998), provides a critical lens for reconstructing the typical tripartite collaborative network involving universities, government, and kindergartens. Building upon the aforementioned context and problem awareness, this study employs IORT as its analytical framework. It centers on the core issue of constructing a “student-centered” collaborative education system, systematically deconstructing the role functions and interaction patterns of universities, government, and kindergartens within the collaborative education network. This provides theoretical support for establishing a high-quality preschool education teacher talent training community with Chinese characteristics, thereby facilitating the transition from merely "having access to kindergarten" to "accessing high-quality kindergarten education."

Although existing research acknowledges the importance of UGK collaboration and rarely draws upon interorganizational theory, this paper makes distinct contributions in the following three areas, each of which is operationalized in subsequent sections:

1) Students as network "nodes," not merely beneficiaries. Existing literature typically views students as end-users of collaboration or passive outcomes of cultivation. We conceptualize students as active, embedded nodes within the network whose feedback and participation can reshape network dynamics. This repositioning is implemented in sections 3.2 (Role Reconstruction) and 4.4 (Student-Level Endogenous Motivation), where students gain decision-making authority and co-governance roles.

2) Governance design incorporating formal student representation. While many collaborative models rhetorically emphasize "student voice," few institutionalize it. This framework explicitly mandates student seats on the UGK Collaborative Governance Committee and its working groups—a structural innovation detailed in Section 4.2 (Institutional Level). This shifts participation from symbolic gestures to substantive power-sharing.

3) Closed-loop improvement mechanism based on student development data. Unlike conventional quality assurance cycles, this mechanism (see 3.4 and 4.4) directly anchors continuous improvement to long-term tracked student outcomes—internship performance, employment quality, and career development feedback. This will evaluate the core drivers of transitioning from administrative exercises to systemic adaptive evolution.

In summary, these distinctive features transform the UGK tripartite from a static service delivery arrangement into a dynamic, student-centered learning network—representing both a conceptual breakthrough and a practical shift from existing knowledge frameworks.

2. Interpretation of Interorganizational Relationship Theory and Its Applicability in Collaborative Education

Interorganizational relationship theory originated in sociology and management studies. It transcends the limitations of traditional organizational theories that focus solely on internal structures, broadening the research perspective to encompass the complex interactive networks between organizations. Introducing this theory into collaborative education research for preschool education majors at universities provides a theoretical framework for understanding and optimizing multi-stakeholder collaboration.

2.1. Core Concepts of Interorganizational Relationship Theory

Interorganizational relationship theory encompasses rich content, with its core perspectives summarized as follows (Huisman & Li, 2024; Li, 2024; Mayer et al., 1995; Ma, 2010):

First, resource dependence and complementary symbiosis. Organizations cannot self-sufficiently provide all critical resources and must acquire necessities through exchanges with the external environment. Universities possess theoretical knowledge and research resources, governments control policy and financial resources, while kindergartens offer practical settings and experiential resources. A natural resource dependency exists among these three entities. The essence of collaboration lies in achieving complementarity and symbiosis of heterogeneous resources, creating systemic value where "1 + 1 + 1 > 3."

Second, trust and relational governance. For collaboration to be effective, rigid terms like contracts and agreements are insufficient. It must also rely on trust, reciprocal norms, and social capital accumulated through long-term organizational interactions. Trust reduces transaction costs, promotes more thorough knowledge sharing and risk-sharing, and serves as the lubricant and adhesive that maintains the stability and vitality of collaborative networks.

Third, goal negotiation and adaptive flexibility. Each organization within a collaborative network retains its own objectives. The ability to forge consensus amid differences and establish "super-goals" determines the success of collaboration. Simultaneously, as the external environment undergoes constant change, the system must continuously adjust. Through goal refinement, structural optimization, and process feedback, it maintains the resilience and effectiveness of collaboration.

Fourth, Network Structure and Embeddedness. Organizational interactions weave a complex social network. Node positioning, relationship strength, and the presence of structural holes determine who can access resources and information most efficiently. Truly embedding students—a critical node—into the UGK collaborative network, shifting them from periphery to center, represents a breakthrough for enhancing the network's overall effectiveness.

2.2. Analysis of the Applicability of Theory in UGK Collaborative Education

Interorganizational relationship theory provides a systematic analytical framework and feasible pathways for resolving the current UGK collaborative dilemma. First, it identifies the root causes of the dilemma as the disruption of resource dependency chains and insufficient trust capital. Universities, governments, and kindergartens mutually depend on each other, yet the absence of stable resource exchange platforms and credible co-construction mechanisms hinders the transformation of dependency into collaborative action. Second, the theory charts a course for building collaborative systems. Structurally, it clarifies the responsibilities of all parties and designs an appropriate governance framework; procedurally, it establishes communication, decision-making, and feedback channels; relationally, it cultivates an organizational culture of trust, reciprocity, and shared value. Third, the theory emphasizes the core value of students as key stakeholders. Within the inter-organizational relationship network, students represent both the ultimate destination of resources and the critical information source for network iteration—their feedback, growth, and employment outcomes serve as the primary vehicles for value creation. A student perspective means all institutional arrangements and operational processes must serve students' holistic development and capacity enhancement.

2.3. Analytical Approach

This study employs interorganizational relationship theory as a deductive analytical framework to deconstruct and reconstruct the UGK collaborative system. The theoretical application process comprises three stages:

Concept Selection. We extracted four core concepts directly relevant to educational collaboration from the interorganizational relations literature: resource dependence, trust-based governance, goal negotiation, and network embeddedness (see 2.1). These concepts were selected because they collectively explain the causes of collaborative inertia and pathways to overcome it.

Mapping to UGK Actors. Each concept is mapped to the tripartite structure: resource dependency corresponds to universities' need for internship sites, governments' need for policy implementation, and kindergartens' need for theoretical input; trust-based governance addresses the relational deficit identified in prior research; goal negotiation reflects the differing missions of the three institutions; network embeddedness highlights students as a long-neglected yet crucial node.

Deriving the Implementation Pathway. Theoretical concepts are not merely descriptive but are transformed into concrete design elements. Resource dependency permeates the "four-party collaboration" role reconstruction (3.2) and resource-sharing platform (4.3); trust-based governance underpins mechanism innovation (3.4); goal negotiation shapes the consensus-building process at the objective level (4.1); while network embeddedness directly drives participation pathways at the student level (4.4). Thus, the entire framework—from role reconfiguration to implementation pathways—is systematically derived from the selected theoretical premises.

3. Core Elements of the Student-Centered UGK Collaborative Education System

3.1. Design Principles for Student-Centered UGK Collaboration

To make the abstract concept of "student-centered" actionable and measurable, we define it through three observable design principles. Together, these principles reshape UGK collaborative practice:

Principle One: Decision-Making Participation—Students transition from "shapeless entities" to "co-governors." In traditional models, curricula, practical arrangements, and evaluation standards are unilaterally determined by universities, leaving students at the periphery of decision-making. The student-centered principle mandates the establishment of permanent student seats within UGK joint deliberative bodies related to student development. This ensures students hold substantive influence in matters such as course evaluations and base selection.

Principle Two: Feedback Responsiveness—Transforming Student Experience from "Periodic Collection" to "Closed-Loop Governance." Traditional models often confine student feedback to mid-term forums and graduation surveys, lacking traceability for feedback implementation. The student-centered principle mandates establishing a standardized response process—"Request Submission → Centralized Handling → Improvement Feedback"—and using average response time and issue resolution rate as indicators for collaborative effectiveness.

Principle Three: Capability Development Outcomes—Shifting educational outcomes from "knowledge transmission" to "transferable skill development." Traditional models emphasize meeting course credit requirements and practice hour thresholds. The student-centered principle mandates establishing a competency-based evaluation system for early childhood educators, focusing on core competencies like critical reflection, pedagogical wisdom, and professional identity. The extent of competency growth becomes a key basis for allocating UGK resources.

Decision-making authority is redistributed, feedback responsiveness builds a continuous improvement loop, and competency development outcomes reorient all activities toward visible student growth. Together, these three elements propel the system from "institution-centered management" toward "student-centered co-creation."

3.2. Role Reconstruction: From "Tripartite Separation" to "Quadruple Coordination"

The prerequisite for system construction is the clear positioning and fundamental reconstruction of roles. It is imperative to fundamentally shift away from the traditional notion of viewing students as passive recipients, instead establishing their status as the "value core" and "co-creators" within the collaborative system.

Students are the core value and active agents. Students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge or mechanical trainees of skills, but rather complete individuals with rich personalities and developmental potential. Their core needs include solid theoretical literacy, proficient childcare and teaching skills, deep professional identity, sustained lifelong learning capabilities, and promising career development prospects. Throughout the collaborative process, students should evolve from being "recipients" and "participants" in the training journey into "agents" equipped with reflective capabilities and practical wisdom. Their feedback serves as the core benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of collaboration, while their growth constitutes the fundamental driving force behind system optimization.

Universities as organizers and theoretical leaders. Universities serve as the "organizers" and "designers" of talent cultivation, with their core functions encompassing systematic knowledge transmission, academic research leadership, professional value shaping, and foundational skill training (Gong et al., 2017). In collaborative efforts, universities must proactively dismantle the barriers of the "ivory tower." Their curriculum design, teaching content, and pedagogical reforms must closely align with the practical frontiers and policy directions of kindergarten education, respecting and integrating practical knowledge.

Government as a strategic leader and system integrator. The government serves as the "leader" and "promoter" of collaborative education, with its core functions encompassing policy and regulation formulation, macro-level planning guidance, financial funding guarantees, quality supervision and evaluation, as well as teacher demand forecasting and staffing planning (McPherson & Lampert, 2025). The government should leverage its public authority and resource allocation advantages to build platforms for deep UGK collaboration, provide institutional incentives, and ensure stable expectations.

Kindergartens serve as bases for professional practice and sources of practical wisdom. As both "supporters" and "testing grounds" for talent cultivation, their core value lies in providing authentic, stable, and high-quality practical teaching environments. Frontline outstanding educators act as practice mentors, providing feedback on talent needs and quality information while participating in curriculum revisions and practical course development (Ou & Wang, 2021).

To enhance the accessibility and practical guidance of the collaborative mechanism, this study further translates the "quadruple coordination" into specific observable metrics: frequency of joint decision-making events, such as the number of committee meetings held each semester where the four parties vote on curriculum or internship policies; proportion of co-produced outputs, such as the number of jointly developed courses, teaching cases, policy recommendations, or research reports; Student governance participation rate, such as the proportion of seats held by student representatives on the UGK Collaborative Education Committee and its subcommittees, and the number of proposals initiated by students.

3.3. Relationship Optimization: From "Unidirectional Output" to "Bidirectional Interaction"

Building upon role reconstruction, efforts must focus on optimizing three core bilateral relationships, transforming them from unidirectional, linear output-reception dynamics into bidirectional, cyclical interaction-symbiosis relationships.

Universities and kindergartens should form symbiotic entities characterized by "complementary strengths." The core lies in dismantling the lofty stance of theory and the entrenched biases of practice. Through initiatives such as "university faculty conducting research in kindergartens," "kindergarten teachers teaching at universities," "jointly building teaching case repositories," and "collaborative action research" (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014; Kang et al., 2020), we achieve a profound collision and integration of theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. Together, we generate "practical theory" applicable to complex educational contexts.

Universities and governments should form a "strategic interactive" partnership. The government should no longer act solely as a one-way regulator, nor should universities remain passive implementers. Both parties can engage in equal consultation and deep cooperation in areas such as analyzing trends in preschool education, establishing professional standards, constructing quality assessment systems, and planning major projects (Yu & Bjartveit, 2023; Huang & Nong, 2023). Universities provide intellectual support for government decision-making, while governments create policy space for university development and ensure resource allocation.

Government and kindergartens should form a mutually beneficial institutional community. The former incentivizes and supports kindergartens to deeply integrate into collaborative education through fiscal subsidies, standard-setting, and excellence recognition programs. The latter reciprocates by providing high-quality practical training bases and frontline insights to help evaluate policy effectiveness and optimize resource allocation (Wu & Wang, 2020; Tu et al., 2018). Both parties share consistent, long-term interests in enhancing overall preschool education quality and addressing societal demands for "high-quality early childhood education."

To enhance the evaluability and practical guidance of the collaborative mechanism, this study further translates "bidirectional interaction" into specific observable metrics: Number of personnel exchanges, such as the number of university faculty members conducting research in kindergartens per academic year and the number of kindergarten teachers serving as visiting lecturers at universities; Joint professional development activities, such as the frequency of co-hosted workshops, seminars, or action research projects; Information feedback rate, such as the number of practice-based insights formally incorporated into university curriculum revisions, and the volume of theoretical resources downloaded by kindergarten practitioners from shared platforms.

3.4. Mechanism Innovation: From "Administrative Promotion" to "Trust-Building"

Sustainable collaboration cannot rely indefinitely on external drivers; it must establish long-term operational mechanisms grounded in intrinsic trust (Wang et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2021; Jacobus et al., 2011): Trust-Building Mechanisms. By establishing regular communication platforms, sharing successful experiences, jointly addressing crises, and creating reputation evaluation systems, organizations can gradually accumulate cognitive and emotional trust among stakeholders.

Establish a resource-sharing mechanism. Create a UGK information-sharing platform to integrate and publish course resources, practical training positions, policy updates, research findings, and talent requirements. Encourage university faculty and kindergarten teachers to engage in cross-appointments and temporary assignments, jointly developing and sharing physical resources such as training bases and R&D platforms.

Coordination Mechanism. A Collaborative Education Management Committee will be jointly established by representatives from all three parties. This committee will be responsible for reviewing cooperative plans, coordinating major matters, and arbitrating potential disputes. A system combining regular communication with ad hoc consultations will be implemented to ensure information symmetry, scientific decision-making, and smooth execution.

Establish an institutional framework that balances incentives and constraints. Incorporate collaborative education contribution metrics into university faculty evaluations, government performance assessments, and kindergarten grading systems to create a quantifiable evaluation framework. Implement an exit mechanism for entities demonstrating persistent lack of cooperation or failing to meet quality standards, issuing warnings first and removing those that show no improvement.

The continuous improvement mechanism leverages student development data to establish a monitoring and evaluation system. The system regularly collects and analyzes student learning outcomes, practical performance, employment quality, and career development feedback. Based on this data, it dynamically optimizes educational objectives, adjusts curriculum design, refines teaching methods, and enhances collaborative models, forming a closed-loop management system of "evaluation-feedback-improvement."

To enhance the evaluability and practical guidance of the collaborative mechanism, this study further translates the "trust-building mechanism" into specific observable metrics: Dispute resolution turnaround time, such as the average number of days from conflict reporting to mutual acceptance of a resolution; Commitment fulfillment rate, such as the actual completion percentage of items pledged by parties in the annual collaborative plan; Mutual evaluation satisfaction: annual scores from universities, government agencies, and kindergartens assessing each other's cooperative attitude, response efficiency, and resource contribution.

3.5. Power Asymmetries, Conflict-of-Interest Risks, and Mitigation Strategies

Although tripartite collaboration holds appeal at the normative level, the UGK partnership inherently carries risks of power imbalances and divergent institutional interests. Without deliberate mitigation measures, these risks will erode trust and perpetuate the very synergistic inertia the framework seeks to overcome. We have identified three prominent risks and their corresponding mitigation strategies:

1) Government compliance pressures. Authorities may prioritize regulatory uniformity and administrative efficiency over pedagogical innovation, imposing top-down directives that restrict collaborative flexibility. Mitigation tool: Establish joint policy co-design teams comprising government officials, university researchers, and kindergarten practitioners. These teams review draft regulations before issuance to balance compliance requirements with professional autonomy.

2) Kindergarten Workload. Deep involvement in teacher training—mentoring interns, co-teaching, participating in curriculum development—adds unpaid labor to already overburdened kindergarten staff. Mitigation tool: Granting certified partner status by education authorities. Kindergartens with this designation receive additional funding, reduced inspection frequency, or public recognition, transforming collaboration into tangible institutional benefits.

3) University Credential Incentives. Universities typically base faculty promotions primarily on published papers and approved projects, while deep collaborations with kindergarten partners are time-consuming and receive low recognition in such evaluations. Mitigation Tool: Revise faculty evaluation systems to explicitly treat contributions to collaborative education—such as joint action research, practice-oriented curriculum innovation, and internship guidance—as equivalent to traditional academic achievements in annual assessments and professional title evaluations.

4. Pathways for Building a Student-Centered UGK Collaborative Education System

4.1. Objective Level: Forging a Collaborative Consensus Centered on Students

Building a student-centered UGK collaborative education system begins with truly aligning the goals of universities, government, and kindergartens into a unified force, forming a "goal community" focused on students' holistic development. Guided by the contemporary imperative of "quality early childhood education," institutionalized dialogue and consultation enable the three parties to reach consensus at the value level. Cultivating outstanding preschool educators is both a shared social responsibility and a mutual developmental opportunity, thereby naturally embedding each organization's goals into the overall blueprint of collaborative education. Next, the overarching goal of cultivating "high-caliber, professional, and innovative early childhood educators" must be broken down into observable and evaluable components. This involves systematically constructing a measurable indicator framework encompassing specialized knowledge, practical skills, and professional ethics. Throughout this process, government policy signals and kindergarten job requirements must be fully integrated to ensure talent specifications precisely align with industry standards (Tan, 2017). Simultaneously, a government-led, tripartite collaborative mechanism for talent demand forecasting and dynamic adjustment should be established. Regular industry talent supply-demand reports should be published to promptly refine the scale, structure, and quality requirements of talent cultivation, ensuring sustained equilibrium and positive interaction between educational supply and societal demand.

4.2. Institutional Level: Establishing a Collaborative Framework with Clear Responsibilities and Authorities

Institutional frameworks form the foundation for the sustained operation of collaborative education systems. Top-level design, protocol standards, and organizational structures must advance in tandem to create a closed-loop system. Local governments and education authorities can take the lead by issuing specialized guidance documents or implementation measures to clarify the boundaries of responsibilities and collaborative models among universities, governments, and kindergartens, thereby establishing institutional coordinates for subsequent operations. In the implementation phase, universities, local governments, and high-quality kindergartens should jointly sign legally binding collaborative education agreements. These agreements must detail responsibilities, rights, and benefits regarding curriculum development, practical teaching, faculty exchanges, resource allocation, and student development, avoiding vague or impractical terms. At the organizational level, a UGK Collaborative Governance Committee should be established, comprising academic leaders from universities, government education administrators, kindergarten principals, and student representatives. This committee should establish regular deliberation, coordination, and oversight mechanisms to ensure timely progress on all tasks and prompt evaluation of outcomes.

4.3. Resource Level: Building a Collaborative Platform for "Joint Construction and Shared Benefits"

Resource integration and optimized allocation serve as the pivotal drivers for enhancing the efficiency of collaborative education systems. A multi-tiered, multi-dimensional co-construction and sharing mechanism should be established to facilitate the seamless flow and deep integration of resources among universities, governments, and kindergartens (Zhu et al., 2025).

In terms of curriculum resource development, universities and kindergartens can jointly design modular, project-based practical courses and collaboratively create high-quality teaching materials and case libraries tailored to frontline needs. Relevant government departments are invited to participate in developing and interpreting education policy courses, helping students grasp the macro educational landscape. For faculty development, comprehensively implement a "dual-mentor system" and establish a dynamically updated UGK collaborative faculty database. Through joint teaching research, specialized training, and academic exchanges, foster mutual enrichment between theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom to catalyze innovation (Xu et al., 2025). For practical training bases, we are upgrading internship sites from simple observation venues into collaborative innovation platforms integrating teaching, research, and training. This supports joint research projects and pedagogical reforms between universities and kindergartens. Governments can also establish teacher training centers or policy pilot zones within these bases to enhance resource utilization efficiency. In information technology development, aligning with the digital and intelligent era, an integrated collaborative education management platform is being built. This platform unifies functions such as curriculum management, internship scheduling, resource sharing, quality monitoring, and interactive communication, breaking down information barriers to comprehensively enhance the operational efficiency and management standards of collaborative education.

4.4. Student Level: Unleashing the Collaborative Power of "Endogenous Motivation"

Placing students at the core of the collaborative education system is key to activating its intrinsic momentum. To achieve this, participation rights must be institutionalized, extending across multiple dimensions and throughout the entire educational journey to ensure genuine voice and decision-making authority.

The first step involves establishing a closed-loop feedback-response platform. Through channels such as satisfaction surveys, internship forums, project showcases, and online evaluations, systematically collect student feedback on courses, practical training, mentors, and management. Subsequently, specialized teams analyze and assess this feedback, providing timely responses and driving continuous improvement to ensure that student concerns are genuinely addressed (Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019).

Step Two: Expand formal pathways for student participation in governance structures by establishing student seats within the UGK Collaborative Governance Committee and its working groups. This enables students to deeply engage in key matters such as curriculum revision, course quality assessment, and selection of practical training bases, thereby enhancing the representativeness and responsiveness of governance. Simultaneously, universities, governments, and kindergartens should integrate policy, funding, and practical resources to build a coherent career support chain spanning the four-year undergraduate program. Through policy interpretation, career assessments, on-the-job training, and competency certification, they should provide systematic and professional growth guidance. This approach ensures seamless integration between theoretical learning, practical training, and career development, ultimately enabling students' growth needs to drive the iterative evolution of the collaborative system (Romero-Rodríguez et al.,2022).

4.5. Enhanced Evaluation Logic: Minimizing the Results Chain and Identifying Feasible Data Sources

To ensure the impact of the student-centered UGK system is empirically traceable, we propose a minimal outcomes chain linking inputs to long-term faculty outcomes through intermediate processes and student-level gains. This chain provides a simplified logic model for formative and summative evaluation: Inputs → Process → Student Outcomes → Workforce Outcomes. Specifically: Inputs layer: Policy authorization, dedicated funding, teacher time allocation, kindergarten mentor capacity, digital platform infrastructure. Process layer: Quadripartite governance meetings, collaborative curriculum development, internship supervision, cross-appointments. Student Outcomes Layer: Subject knowledge exam scores, teaching competency assessments, internship performance ratings, career commitment, graduate employability. Workforce Outcomes Layer: Employment rate in early childhood education, first-year retention rate, career advancement speed, contribution to kindergarten quality improvement.

Corresponding viable data sources include: internship performance portfolios (jointly evaluated by kindergarten mentors and university mentors), annual graduate employment quality reports (incorporating major-to-job alignment rates and starting salary levels), and career development tracking surveys (assessing professional adaptability and field identification within 1 - 3 years post-graduation).

This outcome chain not only clarifies the causal logic of intervention measures but also provides a set of specific indicators that can be monitored through routine institutional data collection, thereby supporting evidence-based optimization of the UGK system.

5. Conclusion

Establishing a student-centered UGK collaborative education system represents a strategic choice to address contemporary challenges and deepen teacher education reform. It is also a complex undertaking involving conceptual renewal, structural reorganization, process reengineering, and relational restructuring. Interorganizational relationship theory offers profound insights into understanding the essence of collaboration and resolving its dilemmas. True collaboration transcends mere physical aggregation; it constitutes a profound chemical reaction. Its core lies in establishing student development as the shared value origin. Through consensus on objectives, complementary resource allocation, trust-building, and mechanism innovation, it ignites the intrinsic motivation of the three key stakeholders—universities (U), government (G), and kindergartens (K)—forging an educational community that shares weal and woe, coexists, and grows together.

The construction and refinement of future systems demand greater reform courage and educational wisdom from all stakeholders. This requires the boldness to break down organizational barriers, the audacity to innovate institutional frameworks, the expertise to design operational mechanisms, and the diligence to cultivate a culture of trust. Only through such efforts can we achieve deep integration across the entire teacher preparation chain—leveraging universities' curriculum resources, government's institutional levers, and kindergartens' practical settings—and transition from a "supply-driven" to a "demand-driven" paradigm. This will cultivate outstanding early childhood education professionals grounded in China's practices and oriented toward future development, thereby achieving a systemic upgrade of the talent supply ecosystem in early childhood education.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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