

An Investigation of Kindergarten Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education in Suzhou

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Abstract: To investigate mainstream kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for children with special needs, this study surveyed 422 teachers from 26 inclusive kindergartens in Suzhou. The findings indicate that while teachers in inclusive settings possess some understanding of children with special needs, this knowledge remains limited. Teachers expressed greater willingness to accept children with special needs into mainstream kindergartens when adequate teaching support is available and parents of typically developing children are supportive. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed to provide empirical reference points for advancing preschool inclusive education in China.

Keywords: Preschool inclusive education; Kindergarten teachers; Teacher attitudes

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1. Introduction

Preschool inclusive education refers to an educational approach where children with special educational needs (SEN) attend regular kindergartens and receive care and education alongside typically developing peers ^[1]. Currently, placing young children with special needs in inclusive preschool settings, rather than enrolling them in traditional segregated special institutions, has become a global educational trend ^[2].

Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) represents the predominant approach for educating children with special needs in China. This model places students with special educational needs alongside their typically developing peers in general education classrooms. While LRC initiatives have achieved initial scale nationwide, the critical challenge now lies in transitioning from expansion to quality enhancement, thereby advancing inclusive education standards ^[3].

Multiple factors influence LRC quality improvement, yet teachers play a pivotal role as frontline implementers. Substantial research indicates that successful inclusive education hinges significantly on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. As noted by Tesser and Shaffer, attitudes shape individuals' evaluations and

judgments toward attitudinal objects, subsequently guiding behavioral responses ^[4]. Consequently, academic attention increasingly focuses on the attitudes of inclusive preschool teachers, and the primary practitioners of inclusive education ^[5]. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and young children with special needs directly affect the psychological well-being of children with disabilities ^[6].

Given this context, this study focuses on kindergarten teachers in Suzhou, China. It systematically investigates their current attitudes towards inclusive education for preschool children with SEN. Based on the findings, the study aims to provide targeted recommendations. The goal is to offer empirical evidence and decision-making references for optimizing preschool inclusive education practices.

2. Research methods

2.1. Participants

This study employed random sampling, targeting teachers from 26 kindergartens in Suzhou. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed on-site. Of these, 422 valid questionnaires were collected, yielding an effective response rate of 84.4%.

The sample was predominantly female (411 participants, 97.39%), reflecting the gender distribution common in the kindergarten teaching profession. Most participants were aged 45 or younger, with teachers aged 22–45 constituting 92.18% of the sample. This indicates that the surveyed teachers were primarily in the early-to-middle stages of their careers. In terms of educational background, the majority held bachelor's degrees (327 participants, 77.49%). All participants had an early childhood education background; none had specialized in special education. Therefore, the participants were predominantly early-to-middle career female teachers with bachelor's degrees, working in inclusive preschools.

2.2. Research instrument

The research instrument was a self-developed questionnaire titled Questionnaire on Preschool Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education. Its development drew upon the Questionnaire for Educators on Preschool Inclusive Education originally developed by Toby Long and translated by Zhou Nianli and the Questionnaire on Preschool Educators' Views and Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education developed by Sun Yumei ^[7].

The final questionnaire comprised 25 items, divided into two sections. Section One collected basic demographic information, including gender, age, teaching experience, and educational level. Section Two assessed participants' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive preschool education, focusing on their level of understanding, acceptance, and behavioral intentions. The questionnaire demonstrated good psychometric properties. Cronbach's alpha was 0.897. Split-half reliability was 0.849. For validity, the KMO measure was 0.911, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .05$), indicating good structural validity.

2.3. Data analysis

All collected data were statistically analyzed using SPSS (Version 26).

3. Results

This section analyzes survey results on subjects' attitudes, defined as an enduring system comprising cognition, affect, and behavioral tendencies toward objects, ideas, or individuals. The study categorized the inclusive

preschool teachers' attitudes into three dimensions. Results indicated that 98.34% of preschool teachers reported having exposure to or knowledge of inclusive preschool education, while a minimal proportion (1.66%) reported no prior exposure or knowledge. This establishes that the overwhelming majority of preschool teachers possess foundational awareness of inclusive preschool education.

3.1. Analysis of preschool teachers' understanding of inclusive education

This study investigated 11 categories of children with special needs, Survey data on teachers' knowledge of children with special needs revealed a consistent pattern wherein the highest proportion of respondents reported Neutral knowledge for all disability types. This category ranged from 44.55% (Speech-Language Impairments) to 49.29% (Intellectual Disabilities). Approximately half of the preschool teachers (45.87%) reported a moderate level of understanding regarding children with special needs. Those reporting limited or very limited understanding accounted for 24.15%, while those reporting thorough or good understanding comprised 29.98%.

3.2. Analysis of preschool teachers' acceptance of children with special needs

Survey results revealed distinct patterns in teacher acceptance. Language impairments were the most readily accepted condition (44.79%), followed by giftedness (31.52%). Conversely, the least accepted conditions were multiple disabilities, visual impairments, and autism spectrum disorder, with children having multiple disabilities being accepted by only 6.4% of teachers. This pattern aligns with the teachers' self-reported knowledge levels presented in **Table 1**. Notably, a significant proportion of teachers (26.07%) expressed reluctance to accept any type of child with special needs into their classrooms.

Table 1. Attitudes toward admitting children with special needs into kindergartens

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	75	17.77%
Agree	105	24.88%
Neutral	135	31.99%
Disagree	89	21.09%
Strongly Disagree	18	4.27%

3.3. Attitudes toward admitting children with special needs into kindergartens

Table 1 presents the survey results on preschool teachers' willingness to accept children with special needs into their Kindergartens. The data indicated that 42.65% of teachers expressed willingness to accept these children. Approximately one-third (31.99%) reported a neutral stance, while a quarter (25.36%) indicated unwillingness.

3.4. Attitudes toward admitting children with special needs into their own classrooms

Table 2 presents survey results on preschool teachers' willingness to accept children with special needs into their own classrooms. The data show that 35.55% of teachers expressed willingness for such placements. Approximately one-third (34.36%) reported a neutral stance, while 30.1% indicated unwillingness.

Table 2. Attitudes toward admitting children with special needs into their own classrooms

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	63	14.93%
Agree	87	20.62%
Neutral	145	34.36%
Disagree	100	23.7%
Strongly Disagree	27	6.4%

A comparison of **Table 1** and **Table 2** reveals a notable pattern, where teachers expressed willingness to accept children with special needs into their own classrooms (35.55%) was slightly lower than their willingness to accept these children into the preschool generally (42.65%). This suggests that while teachers may support the principle of inclusion at the institutional level, they exhibit greater reluctance regarding the practical implementation of inclusion within their immediate teaching environments.

3.5. Reasons for preschool teachers' rejection of children with special needs

Survey results indicate that the core factors hindering preschool teachers' acceptance of children with special needs, ranked in descending order of reported frequency, where excessive class size preventing adequate individual attention ($n = 277$), concerns about opposition from parents of typically developing children ($n = 198$), severity of the child's disability ($n = 160$), and other reasons ($n = 95$).

Consequently, the primary barrier limiting teachers' willingness to accept these children is insufficient capacity due to overly large classes. Furthermore, the attitudes of typically developing children's parents towards children with special needs represent another significant factor influencing the effectiveness of preschool inclusive education implementation. See **Table 3** for details.

Table 3. Reasons for preschool teachers' rejection of children with special needs

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Excessively large class size hindering individualized attention	277	65.64%	1
Concerns about opposition from typically developing children's parents	198	46.92%	2
Severity of child's disability	160	37.91%	3
Other reasons	95	22.51%	4

4. Discussion

4.1. Limited understanding of children with special needs among preschool teachers

The survey reveals that most preschool teachers possess only a "basic" or lower level of understanding regarding children with special needs. Data indicate that teachers' awareness levels vary significantly across disability types.

- (1) Awareness was relatively higher for speech/language disorders (39.81%), emotional/behavioral disorders (38.39%), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (34.36%).
- (2) Awareness levels for speech/language disorders and emotional/behavioral disorders were similar; emotional/behavioral disorders and Autism Spectrum Disorder represented the types with the highest relative teacher awareness.

- (3) Conversely, awareness was notably lower for hearing impairments (23.7%), multiple disabilities (22.27%), and visual impairments (21.56%). This lower awareness may be associated with the less frequent presence of children with these specific disabilities in mainstream settings.

In summary, preschool teachers' knowledge about different types of children with special needs is uneven, with only certain common types understood to a moderate degree.

4.2. Generally low acceptance levels of children with special needs among preschool teachers

The survey indicates that acceptance levels towards children with special educational needs among teachers in inclusive kindergartens in Suzhou City are generally low and require improvement.

Concerning types of disabilities, teachers generally showed greater willingness to accept children with milder impairments, particularly those with speech/language disorders or gifted children. Conversely, they reported significantly higher levels of difficulty accepting children with visual impairments, multiple disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or intellectual disabilities. This pattern reveals implicit teacher expectations concerning children's emotion regulation, behavior management, and cognitive abilities, indicating relatively higher acceptance for children whose special needs are perceived as causing minimal disruption to classroom order or being easier to manage.

4.3. Factors constraining preschool teachers' acceptance of children with special needs

Although most preschool teachers endorse inclusive education, less than 50% support the actual enrollment of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. This study identified a structural shortage of qualified teachers as the primary barrier to acceptance. Secondly, resistance from parents of typically developing children exerts significant pressure on teachers. Home-kindergarten collaboration is fundamental to early childhood education. Opposition from these parents undermines this collaborative mechanism, severely hindering the development of an inclusive education ecosystem.

Furthermore, limitations in teachers' professional competence constitute another critical factor. Insufficient systematic training in special education leaves many teachers feeling inadequately prepared when encountering children with significant disabilities. This lack of professional confidence further influenced teachers' attitudes and compromised their practical efficacy.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Strengthening the cultivation of inclusive education competency in the pre-service phase

Integrating inclusive education competency development into pre-service teacher training plays a foundational role in shaping teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion. Research indicates that systematic pre-service programs significantly enhance teachers' supportive attitudes towards inclusive education and deepen their understanding of its principles ^[8].

Introducing inclusive education concepts and practices at the initial stage of teacher education allows prospective teachers to learn and grow within inclusive settings. This experience helps them normalize student diversity. It fosters their acceptance and adaptation to diverse classroom environments. It also enhances their ability to deliver quality instruction in diverse classrooms.

They were more likely to perceive student diversity as an asset rather than a barrier. This perspective helps prevent viewing inclusive education as an extra burden and reduces associated fears.

5.2. Providing instructional support for in-service kindergarten inclusive teachers

This study finds that while kindergarten teachers hold relatively accepting attitudes toward children with special needs, they require specific support to effectively include these children in their classrooms. Support for educating children with special needs in inclusive settings thus emerges as a critical determinant of the feasibility and effectiveness of preschool inclusion.

With inclusive preschool education rapidly expanding in China, there is an urgent need for each inclusive kindergarten to employ 1–2 special education professionals. These professionals should provide regular consultation and instructional guidance to general education teachers. In resource-constrained contexts, an itinerant support model can be implemented. Special education professionals using this model offer timely and effective support to teachers in inclusive classroom^[9]. This approach reduces the workload and stress of general education teachers, enabling them to focus more energy on teaching practices^[10].

5.3. Enhancing in-service training for kindergarten teachers in inclusive education

A key reason kindergarten teachers hesitate to include children with special needs is their lack of self-confidence^[11]. Teachers' level of competence in inclusive education significantly predicts their sense of self-efficacy in this field. Therefore, strengthening in-service training is crucial for improving kindergarten teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive education^[12]. Education authorities and schools should provide specialized training on inclusive education. This training helps general education teachers progressively develop more positive attitudes towards inclusion. This development occurs through the gradual accumulation of knowledge, concepts, and skills related to inclusive education^[13]. Additionally, training should enhance collaborative skills for teachers in inclusive kindergartens. Offering courses on communication techniques within training programs can improve communication efficiency. This improvement facilitates better collaboration among educators^[14].

5.4. Enhancing organizational support to improve teacher attitudes towards inclusive education

To advance inclusive education, kindergartens must shift from passive acceptance to active organizational support, thereby strengthening early childhood teachers' sense of primary responsibility. Empirical evidence confirms that organizational support significantly and positively influences teachers' development of favorable attitudes toward inclusive education^[15]. Consequently, kindergartens should move beyond merely enrolling children with special needs and actively foster teachers' primary responsibility for inclusive practices.

Kindergarten administrators should optimize the physical environment to cultivate a caring atmosphere. This involves establishing an inclusive campus culture and barrier-free facilities, subtly nurturing teachers' educational commitment. Additionally, administrators should innovate management systems to reshape relationships. Creating collaborative mechanisms enables meaningful interaction among children with special needs, typically developing peers, and those with diverse characteristics. This ensures every child feels recognized, reconstructing teacher-student and peer relationships to achieve psychological inclusion.

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