

# Research on the Policy Evolution of Inclusive Education from an International Comparative Perspective

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**Abstract:** In recent years, thanks to the vigorous promotion by UNESCO, inclusive education has rapidly developed and spread worldwide. Governments across various nations have responded and implemented this approach, successively introducing laws and policies to ensure that children with special needs are better integrated into society and receive a comprehensive education. This paper begins by exploring the concept and connotation of inclusive education. Through an international comparative perspective, it conducts a comparative analysis of the policy evolution of inclusive education in China and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it investigates the implications that advanced international policy experiences have for the development of inclusive education in China.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education; International perspective; Policy evolution; Comparative analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education embodies the educational principles of universality, equality, and human rights. It is oriented towards combating discrimination and welcoming all students, thereby providing suitable and effective educational conditions for the vast majority of school-age children, particularly those with special educational needs. This approach facilitates their better integration into the educational environment and mainstream society, significantly enhancing the overall efficacy of the education system. In recent years, governments worldwide have been actively implementing the concept of inclusive education and have introduced related laws and policies. Western countries, particularly in Europe and America, have generally adopted inclusive education earlier, and their related policies and laws are more developed. In contrast, the practice of inclusive education in the Asia-Pacific region and China is relatively delayed. Therefore, a detailed comparative analysis of the policy evolution of inclusive education in the United Kingdom (UK) and China, viewed through an international comparative lens, can provide valuable references and insights for the development and refinement of inclusive education practices and policies in China.

## **2. The concept and connotation of inclusive education**

### **2.1. Concept**

The concept of inclusive education refers to the pedagogical approach that emphasizes the importance of providing all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, with equal opportunities for educational success within a common learning environment <sup>[1]</sup>. This approach advocates for the modification of content, teaching methods, and environments to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners and to promote their full participation in the educational process.

The core principle of inclusive education is to oppose discrimination and embrace all children, ensuring that every child of appropriate age has equal access to education. Currently, the application of inclusive education extends far beyond the realms of special needs education or education for individuals with disabilities, encompassing the entirety of general education.

### **2.2. Connotation**

The first aspect is equity. Inclusive education emphasizes the importance of equity in basic education, asserting that it is the responsibility of educational systems to provide equal learning opportunities to every school-age child.

The second aspect pertains to the nature of human rights. Within the conceptual framework of inclusive education, the fundamental right to education is afforded to all children of appropriate school age, rather than being a privilege reserved for a select few. Moreover, providing educational opportunities to children with special needs or disabilities is not a special favor granted to them; rather, it is a basic right that all children are entitled to.

The third aspect is anti-discrimination. Inclusive education demands that the educational system acknowledges and respects the differences among children. Educators should embrace and respect these differences, striving to cultivate an attitude of acceptance. This approach opposes any measures within the educational system that discriminate against or marginalize vulnerable groups.

## **3. The evolution of inclusive education policy: An international comparative perspective**

### **3.1. The development of inclusive education promoted by international policy documents**

The origins and development of inclusive education are profoundly connected to the post-World War II international efforts aimed at advocating for democracy, equality, and the protection of human dignity. Beginning in the 1960s, influenced by a series of international conventions and charters on human rights, some Western countries—particularly the Nordic nations—began to reconsider the adverse impacts of special education schools on the development and social integration of individuals with disabilities. This reflection led to the advocacy for the maximal inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms within mainstream schools, promoting their education alongside peers without disabilities.

The emergence of this novel educational approach marks the commencement of the initial exploration into inclusive education. Throughout the formation and development of inclusive education, international organizations and institutions, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have played a pivotal role. Notably, the international policy documents issued at three major international educational conferences have directly accelerated the rapid development of inclusive education.

At the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, it was proposed that education is a fundamental human right; the objective of universal education is to fulfill the basic learning needs of all individuals <sup>[2]</sup>. The

educational needs of individuals with disabilities require special attention. Measures must be taken to provide equal educational opportunities for people with various disabilities and to integrate such education as an integral component of the educational system.

Adopted at the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, the concept of inclusive education and inclusive schools was formally proposed in the Declaration of Salamanca, emphasizing that each individual possesses unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. Schools are expected to welcome all children and address their specific educational requirements <sup>[3]</sup>.

During the 48th International Conference on Education in 2008, themed “Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future,” emphasis was placed on the responsibility of existing educational systems to educate all children. This responsibility extends beyond merely educating gifted and average children to also include educating children with disabilities, those experiencing learning difficulties, and all children who are in disadvantaged situations. The conference highlighted the importance of acknowledging and respecting the diversity of these children and stressed the necessity of providing them with a supportive learning environment and diverse educational opportunities <sup>[4]</sup>.

In addition to the international policy documents issued at the aforementioned significant conferences, the 5th International Conference on Special Education Research, held in the United Kingdom in July 2000 and themed “Embracing the Excluded,” further concentrated on the topic of inclusive education <sup>[5]</sup>. The conference reached a consensus on the scope of beneficiaries for the implementation of inclusive education, noting that despite the development of the global movement for universal education, many individuals continue to face discrimination and exclusion for various reasons. Consequently, the target group for inclusive education extends beyond individuals with disabilities to include those who experience learning difficulties due to various factors, as well as those who are enrolled but have not been adequately supported, those who have not had the opportunity to enroll, and individuals with severe disabilities who require additional assistance.

## **3.2. The evolution of inclusive education policy from an international comparative perspective**

### **3.2.1. The evolution of inclusive education policy in the United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom, characterized by its advanced level of economic development, places significant emphasis on inclusive education. In order to promote the advancement of inclusive education, the UK has enacted a series of legislative measures. These laws and regulations explicitly establish the status of inclusive education and ensure its rapid development within the legal framework.

For instance, in 1944, the United Kingdom enacted the Education Act 1944, which defined the categories of special education needs and clarified the rights and responsibilities of parents or guardians of children with special needs <sup>[6]</sup>. Subsequently, in 1970, the Education (Handicapped Children) Act 1970 was promulgated, which explicitly delineated the responsibilities of local educational authorities in the education of children with special needs and established a significant number of special education schools to provide educational opportunities for these children <sup>[7]</sup>. In 1976, the Education Act 1976 was introduced, marking the first legislative proposal to integrate children with special needs into mainstream schools. In 1981, the United Kingdom issued The Education (Special Educational Needs Code of Practice) (Appointed Day) Order 1994, which legally introduced the concept of “special educational needs” and specified the need to assess the special educational requirements of children with such needs. In 1993, the United Kingdom promulgated the Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, which detailed the specific criteria for special education assessments, aimed at providing targeted education for children with special needs and thereby enhancing the quality of special education <sup>[8]</sup>.

In response to the significant discrimination faced by children with special needs during the development of special education, the United Kingdom enacted the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. This legislation emphasized the opposition to existing discriminatory practices within special education and promoted the advancement of inclusive education. Subsequently, in 2011, the UK government introduced the Special Educational Needs Information Act: An Analysis 2011, which encouraged the integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools. This act advocated for these children to study and live alongside their peers without special needs, opposing traditional segregated educational approaches and strongly supporting the development of inclusive education.

Overall, in order to ensure the implementation of inclusive education, the United Kingdom has formulated various legal provisions and provided policy guarantees <sup>[9]</sup>. The establishment of a comprehensive legal framework has significantly promoted the development of inclusive education in the UK and has effectively safeguarded the educational rights and interests of children with disabilities.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom has provided substantial financial support for the development of inclusive education, funding mainstream schools to establish integrated settings. This support includes providing allowances for students with disabilities, which can be used to purchase various learning materials or assistive devices such as computers. Additionally, the funds may cover the costs associated with assessments of special educational needs or the hiring of support staff for learning assistance. Overall, the UK has adopted a unified model of inclusive education, aiming to minimize the number of special schools and continuously increase the number of integrated schools, thereby ensuring that basic education serves all children equitably.

### **3.2.2. The evolution of inclusive education policy in China**

In the early 1980s, institutions dedicated to special education in China were limited to specialized schools such as schools for the blind, deaf-mute schools, and schools for children with intellectual disabilities. Following the enactment of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China in 1986, the compulsory education of children with disabilities was formally incorporated into the national compulsory education system. However, at that time, only approximately 60,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in special education schools, leaving a significant number of eligible children with disabilities out of school <sup>[10]</sup>.

In 1989, China embarked on an experimental initiative to integrate disabled children into mainstream schools, aiming to find a suitable approach to universalize compulsory education for disabled children in accordance with the country's specific conditions. This initiative involved the inclusion of disabled students in regular classrooms. Over the subsequent decade, supported by a series of policies such as the Regulations on Education for Individuals with Disabilities, the Implementation Measures for the Inclusion of Disabled Children in Regular Classes, and the Decision on Deepening Educational Reform and Promoting Comprehensive Quality Education, a nationwide effort was launched to advance the integration of disabled children into mainstream educational settings.

Since the onset of the 21st century, China has further refined its legal and regulatory framework concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. Notably, the revised 2017 Regulations on Education for Individuals with Disabilities, along with directives issued by the Ministry of Education such as "Guidance on Strengthening the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Compulsory Education" and "Guidelines for the Development of Special Education Resources in Regular Schools," have been instrumental. The enactment and implementation of these legal and policy measures have ensured the allocation of per capita public funding for students with disabilities in regular schools, gradually prioritized the appointment of special education teachers in mainstream settings, and significantly improved the infrastructure for accessibility in these

institutions. Overall, the scale and quality of education for students with disabilities in mainstream Chinese schools have seen substantial enhancements in recent years. By the end of 2020, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools in China reached approximately 435,800.

The educational model in which children with disabilities are enrolled in regular classes within mainstream schools has become an effective approach for implementing inclusive education in our country <sup>[11]</sup>.

## **4. The evolution of inclusive education policy: Implications for China**

The comparative analysis of the evolution of inclusive education policies between China and the United Kingdom reveals notable differences. The advantages of the UK's inclusive education policy are primarily reflected in two aspects. First, the UK has more comprehensive legislation related to inclusive education, whereas, in China, there are still some provisions in the relevant laws and policies that are not compatible with the concept of inclusive education <sup>[12]</sup>. Second, compared to the UK's integrated education model, China's practice of inclusive education within regular classrooms faces numerous challenges, such as a general lack of robust social support systems and a shortage of pilot inclusive education programs in schools.

### **4.1. Implications for the formulation of relevant laws and regulations**

Recent advancements in inclusive education in the United Kingdom underscore the necessity of legal frameworks as a precursor to the successful implementation of inclusive education policies. Existing legal provisions that hinder the implementation of inclusive education must be reevaluated and amended. This includes revisiting statutes such as The Education (Special Educational Needs Code of Practice) (Appointed Day) Order 1994, the Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China, and the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China to eliminate any clauses that are incompatible with the principles of inclusive education. Furthermore, it is crucial to continually refine the legislative framework concerning the education of individuals with disabilities. This includes enhancing the legislative process for laws such as the "Promotion of Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities Act." Such legislative improvements should broaden the scope of special education services in China, transitioning from an education system that exclusively serves individuals with disabilities to one that accommodates all children with special needs, thereby embodying the ethos and principles of inclusive education <sup>[13]</sup>. Consequently, it is recommended that the national government initiate the legislative process for the "Promotion of Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities Act" at an appropriate time, thereby legally fostering the development of inclusive education in China and ensuring that all children, including those with disabilities, receive appropriate education.

### **4.2. Implications for the construction of social support systems**

The provision of educational services to children with disabilities in mainstream schools necessitates not only the establishment of special education resource classrooms and the employment of special education teachers but also the support and management of the entire educational system. This means that when mainstream schools encounter difficulties and challenges in delivering educational services, they should receive support from higher administrative authorities. Additionally, when faced with challenges related to educational instruction, they should be able to rely on the guidance and assistance of educational research professionals. Therefore, it is essential to construct a support and guarantee system within the educational framework <sup>[14]</sup>. This system might include the development of a comprehensive administrative management system, a research system, and a financial management system, among others.

Additionally, our country should actively initiate pilot projects in inclusive education. Drawing on the

recent practices of inclusive education in the United Kingdom, it is essential to implement pilot projects to establish schools dedicated to inclusive education. Compared to conventional schools, inclusive education schools must exhibit greater inclusivity, eschew discriminatory attitudes, and provide superior and equitable education to all children, whether they are typically developing or have special needs. To launch pilot projects for inclusive education schools, it is imperative to enhance research on the practical aspects of inclusive education. Given the significant differences in both philosophy and practice between inclusive education and the integration of students with disabilities in regular classrooms in our country and developed nations like the UK, we should learn from and adopt the mature experiences and practices of inclusive education from Western developed countries. This approach involves multiple facets including policy leadership, financial support, teacher training, and the provision of special educators. By conducting pilot projects in schools for inclusive education and actively disseminating and applying successful experiences, we can advance this educational approach <sup>[15]</sup>.

## 5. Summary

In the revised 2017 Regulations on Education for Individuals with Disabilities in China, the principle of “inclusive education” was legally established, designating that the education of individuals with disabilities should be primarily the responsibility of mainstream schools, with special education schools also playing a role. However, an examination of the actual development of special education in China reveals that the current level of inclusive education is low, and there remains a significant gap in achieving the goal of “prohibiting any education discrimination based on disability” within the general education system. This paper, through an international comparative perspective, provides a detailed comparison of the policy evolution of inclusive education in China and the UK. Drawing on the strengths of current UK inclusive education policies, it offers suggestions that could inform and enhance the practice and policy development of inclusive education in China.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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