

# Discussion on the Current Situation of Inclusive Education in Chinese Preschools

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**Abstract:** At present, the public is beginning to pay attention to education and the growth of young children, and inclusive education is gradually being valued by the public. Society needs to treat everyone equally, include all children, oppose discrimination and exclusion, and protect the right to education of children with special needs. By discovering and eliminating various learning obstacles, all children have more opportunities to participate in learning and realize the personalization of teaching models. The implementation of inclusive education in kindergartens can enable more children with special needs to adapt to and integrate into society. The article discusses the challenges faced by inclusive education in Chinese preschool under the perspective of inclusive education, in order to improve the quality of inclusive education and promote the healthy physical and mental development of children.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education; Early childhood education; Chinese preschool

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## 1. Introduction

As a result of the social movement for social justice, inclusive education is an emerging educational trend of thought. Inclusive education, which is being raised to call for the equality of educational rights to all students, emphasizes respect for the differences and diversity of students, opposes discrimination and exclusion, ensures all students are treated and valued equally, and meets the needs of diverse students<sup>[1]</sup>. From the perspective of inclusive education, every child is a unique individual with differences and diverse needs, and helping to achieve their individual and social value is an issue we should highlight. According to Pelatti *et al.*<sup>[2]</sup>, the early educational experience of young children serves as a basis for future academic learning and success. As early childhood education (ECE) has a potential feature, the result of ECE will not show immediately but will affect children in the long term and subtly. Therefore, the implementation of early inclusive education is of great significance to shrinking the education gap and is also a manifestation of social justice.

Since the 1990s, the development and practice of inclusive education have been upsurging as a hot issue of education reform and development. Inclusive education was formally put forward for the first time in the Salamanca statement, during the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Spain in 1994. The

statement is mainly based on human rights, pointing out that the core of inclusive education is “education for all.” Diversity of students’ characteristics should be considered in the education system, and they have the right to receive education in regular classrooms <sup>[3]</sup>. As we enter the 21st century, another document, the Dakar Framework for Action, about inclusive education was promulgated by UNESCO <sup>[4]</sup>, which has further improved the details of education for all. Some governments and organizations around the world signed this action framework, and formulated, implemented as well as improved national regulations on inclusive education, under the appeal and leadership of UNESCO.

In order to promote the equality of educational opportunities for children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged groups, China has also made similar commitments <sup>[5]</sup>. “Trial Measures of Implementing Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities,” a document regarding special education was published by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 1994. An educational system named “Learning in Regular Classrooms” (LRC) was developed to serve students with disabilities <sup>[6]</sup>, but this LRC model can be classified as special education instead of inclusion education. Currently, even though the development of inclusive education in China is still in a bump initial stage of exploration, the Chinese government is also committed to spreading inclusive education in the field of early childhood education.

Based on the above, this article will critically analyze the development and practice of inclusive education in the Chinese preschool context through literature review. It first briefly illustrates the popularization of early childhood inclusive education in China and offers the significance and necessity of this type of education implementation. Then, it presents the challenges and problems that inclusive education will face in this context and gives appropriate recommendations and suggestions for this. Lastly, the limitations of the research and the direction of future research are provided before summarizing this article.

## **2. Early childhood inclusive education in Chinese preschool**

Around the 1990s, inclusive education at the early childhood stage was widely practiced in developed countries like Europe and most of the Western countries, but in China, it is only an issue discussed in academic circles or as an attempt to implement it in a few early childhood centers. In the context of globalization and informatization, the concepts and methods of inclusive education have spread rapidly, providing us with convenient conditions for recognizing, learning, and acknowledging inclusive education.

### **2.1. The significance and necessity of early childhood inclusive education**

Existing practices and research results abroad show that the implementation of early childhood inclusive education not only has a positive impact on the development of all children but also can be accepted extensively by teachers and parents, which helps to reduce education costs and save the government education funds <sup>[7]</sup>.

First of all, the implementation of inclusive education in preschool contributes to the comprehensive healthy growth of every child. Inclusive education advocates respect for the diversity and differences of all children in education. The “inclusion” in inclusive education means that regular schools are required to accept all children. All children should study together, regardless of their differences such as physical, intellectual, social, emotional, language, cultural, ethnic, and possible barriers, which means the issue of people having equal rights to education is being highlighted <sup>[8]</sup>. Inclusion is proposed in response to opposite exclusion. Thus, the most basic meaning of inclusive education is to accept all people but not exclude them <sup>[1]</sup>. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of everyone being treated as well as valued with respect rather than only accepting children. As a result of inclusive education, schools should encourage all students to actively participate in schooling, mainly through cooperation and mutual help. The diverse needs of students are also supported

by educators in inclusive education. Different children do not have to adapt to the learning process and environment, but their differences and diverse needs are considered continuously during their learning process.

Furthermore, inclusive education contributes to the construction of a harmonious community and a democratic society. As Armstrong<sup>[9]</sup> stated, education is considered an overwhelming power to promote democracy and expand opportunities for all students. Under an inclusive education system, the phenomenon of discrimination and exclusion in society is likely to be reduced, and at the same time, communities in which everyone will be welcome will be established, and an inclusive society in which everyone can participate is possible to be formed gradually. Ainscow *et al.*<sup>[10]</sup> also pointed out that sustainability and the value of an international community are vital for building a global healthy community. It can be seen that the implementation of inclusive education in preschool promotes the dissemination of democratic ideology, establishes an education concept of equality, respect, and inclusion, pursues the realization of educational democracy goals in the early childhood curriculum, and also develops children's capacities and skills of equal participation, cooperation, and collaboration<sup>[11]</sup>.

Relevant research results confirm that the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood has positive significance not merely for the development of special students but ordinary children. For example, people with Down syndrome used to be segregated in a shelter or refused to go to school, but now they usually engage in regular school to acquire knowledge and skills and participate in community life as well. Carrington and MacArthur<sup>[1]</sup> stated that it is not the people with Down syndrome that have changed, but instead the wider society's choice and acceptance. As we all know, more and more regular schools in Europe and Western countries are opening doors to encourage people with Down syndrome to engage in regular classrooms to acquire academic study. However, most people in China still generally hold the stereotype that people with intellectual disabilities cannot enter schools. There is a doctor with Down syndrome called Li in our community hospital. Although his voice is vague and difficult to hear when he speaks, and his muscles are hard to control and move slowly when writing, there is still a constant stream of people looking for his medical services. Li has the same comprehension ability as an ordinary person, and he can also write and read even type on the keyboard, no different from ordinary people. He can acquire professional medical knowledge and fundamental life skills because he not only received physiological support and care but also timely intervention and assistance in early childhood as well as regular education. This is relevant to his mother who is a doctor and insists on providing him equal education because of a correct cognizance of Down syndrome, so that he has been integrating into the community and achieving his personal value and obtaining respect. Simultaneously, the residents of our community have a new way of thinking of people with Down syndrome, and an open mindset on the minority group as well<sup>[1]</sup>.

Inclusive education is of great significance in the re-recognition and evaluation of the value of people in the entire society, social justice and equality, and human rights issues, and it is necessary to consider including it in early childhood.

## **2.2. The challenges of early childhood inclusive education**

With the circumstances that inclusive education is the development direction of education in the 21st century, the Ministry of Education together with other seven ministries and commissions jointly issued the Special Education Promotion Program in 2014 to clarify the goals and methods for the comprehensive promotion of inclusive education in China<sup>[6]</sup>.

However, due to the special national conditions in China, the development of inclusive education has been far from ideal. This paper discusses the challenges of Chinese early childhood inclusive education in three parts,

including the inaccurate cognition of inclusive education, the lack of policies and support, and the weakness of teachers.

### **2.2.1. Inaccurate cognition of inclusive education**

The initial obstacles encountered by Chinese preschool in the process of setting inclusive education is likely to be caused by not recognizing the real meaning of “inclusive education.” Inclusive education has a narrow and broad distinction. In a narrow way, inclusive education focuses on the acceptance of children with disabilities into regular/mainstream schools and their active participation in various cultures, courses, and community activities, so that they can be integrated into regular schools to the maximum extent <sup>[11]</sup>. Most Chinese civilians regard inclusive education as this narrow level, leading to inclusive education that cannot be effectively implemented correctly. Inclusive education in a broad sense focuses not only on some children with disability, but all children. It brings all students value and respect, regardless of their family, cultural background, and abilities.

Alternatively, marginal groups (such as the minority, who have religious beliefs, and who do not identify exclusively as a man or a woman) are often excluded. It is worth mentioning that ethnic minorities or people with religious beliefs used to have their own independent schools, but now the development of inclusive is optimistic, and respect is reflected in most schools providing them with special meals. In reality, people with psychological problems and marginal groups are more likely to suffer difficulties in inclusion <sup>[12]</sup>. Labels on marginalized groups are almost impossible to remove, and school administrators and parents will not agree to include them in the receiver of inclusive education, even teachers, often cannot regard them as opening and critical.

### **2.2.2. Lack of policies and support**

There are no specific policies on inclusive education ever being issued by the government or organ of state power. “Inclusive education” rarely appears in official government documents, although a series of policies related to inclusive education such as LRC has been formulated. However, the authority and actual legal benefits of its policies are far lower than general laws and regulations, so it is difficult to exert its effect in reality. Therefore, there is great arbitrariness in the implementation of schools at all levels.

In addition, there is a shortage of substantive things, like funds and facilities. For example, the amount of funds allocated for the development of inclusive education is far inferior to that of other types of schools. Additionally, pilot schools for inclusive education are always established in urban areas with rapid economic development, while children in vast rural areas have only the choice to enroll or receive education from local schools nearby, and they probably do not enjoy the education they deserve, and this runs counter to inclusive education <sup>[2]</sup>. The lack of enthusiasm for inclusive education investment from all walks of life is also one of the reasons for the stagnant development of inclusive education.

### **2.2.3. Weakness of teachers**

Inclusive education and its receivers composed of various groups require more demands on teachers <sup>[5]</sup>. For example, deaf students need teachers who mastered sign language skills; disabled students need teachers to understand basic medical first aid knowledge. However, most teachers do not know how to deal with students with disabilities while not recognizing inclusive education. This has led to the situation that students with disabilities in regular classrooms or schools would rather return to special schools. Due to the limited training opportunities available for teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge and abilities for inclusive education, the quality of our teachers cannot keep up with the needs of inclusive education in the short term, especially given

the brevity of these training sessions <sup>[5]</sup>. Normal colleges and universities have not set up inclusive education majors, resulting in a shortage of reserve talents.

### **2.3. Recommendations and suggestions**

Inclusive education aims to ensure that all children are in equal positions and enjoy their rights. Therefore, social justice and equality in enrollment opportunities and educational conditions should be prioritized <sup>[1]</sup>.

Furthermore, inclusive education teachers should strive to provide all children with high-quality experiences to expand their capabilities <sup>[2]</sup>. In the education process, it is essential to respect the diversity and differences among children and meet their various needs. Approaching students with critical and open-minded thinking, regardless of their backgrounds, is crucial because ideas are a powerful force in transforming people's actions <sup>[1]</sup>.

Lastly, multiple parties working together to promote the development of children in inclusive education is essential, especially for early childhood children. The implementation of inclusive education is an arduous and systematic project, which cannot be separated from the support of parents, experts, communities, and relevant policies and laws. It requires the joint efforts of these support systems. Educators ought to popularize "inclusive education" to parents so that all parents cognize the conditions and diversity of their children accurately and achieve social integration <sup>[8]</sup>.

### **3. Limitations and directions for future research**

Although a critical analysis of China's early childhood inclusive education is conducted on the basis of a literature review, there still are limitations in this essay, such as the lack of survey data and statistics support, and the case might also have certain particularities. Therefore, the follow-up research should strive to reduce its limitations. As the development of inclusive education is valued and its process is advanced, we will focus more on how to implement inclusive education efficiently and professionally in the future. For example, how can teachers and experts maximize cooperation, and whether educators can completely replace experts to support students with disabilities after receiving professional training, etc. In addition, based on the concept of inclusive education, how the curriculum should be constructed is also the content to be further studied in detail in the future.

In conclusion, inclusive education is an educational development trend, and it is undoubtedly important for the construction of healthy communities and the achievement of individual values, but its development in Chinese early childhood centers is not optimistic. Although national regulars have been requiring inclusive practices since 1990, for Chinese education managers, parents, and early childhood center teachers, the inclusion of children in Chinese preschools is a relatively new concept. The government's positive attitude has affirmed the establishment of inclusive preschool education as a priority <sup>[13]</sup> and strengthened our expectations for the development of inclusive education.

In spite of the fact that the start of inclusive education in China is slower than in developed countries, as more educators are focusing on inclusive education, and the development of inclusive education is a long-term process, it is believed that the prospects for inclusive education in China are bright.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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