

From Separation to Integration: A Theoretical Construction of the Paradigm Shift in Early Childhood Education Program Curricula

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Abstract

The development of inclusive early childhood education poses fundamental challenges to the traditional “general-special separation” model of teacher preparation. Drawing on paradigm theory, this paper systematically analyzes the paradigm shift in early childhood education program curricula from “general-special separation” to “general-special integration.” The study reveals that the “general-special separation” paradigm exhibits structural deficiencies at the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological levels, and its legitimacy is being undermined by three interrelated logics: theoretical, policy-based, and practical. On this basis, this paper constructs a theoretical framework for a new paradigm — the “dual competence in general and special education” paradigm — elucidating its ontological foundations, epistemological framework, methodological system, and axiological orientations. Finally, a five-dimensional pathway for achieving the paradigm shift is proposed. This study provides a systematic theoretical framework for curriculum reform in early childhood education programs and holds significant theoretical and practical implications for the preparation of inclusive early childhood educators.

Keywords

Paradigm shift, dual competence in general and special education, early childhood education program, curriculum theory.

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement

Inclusive early childhood education has become a major global trend. The “14th Five-Year Plan Action Plan for Promoting Preschool Education Development” explicitly calls for “promoting inclusive education,” and an increasing number of mainstream kindergartens are admitting children with special needs. This change forces kindergarten curricula to rethink their positioning and form: how to construct a curriculum that both supports the development of typically developing children and responds to the needs of children with special needs? Against this background, the “inclusive early childhood education curriculum” has emerged — it refers to a comprehensive curriculum designed by mainstream kindergartens for both typically developing children and those with special needs, who have different learning requirements and ability levels. Its core lies in building a learning ecosystem that supports diversity and respects individual differences [1], but it requires teachers to possess the ability to integrate knowledge and strategies from both general education and special education. However, current early childhood education programs are struggling to support this practical need. The curriculum system has long adhered to a “general-special separation” logic, in which knowledge of general early childhood education and knowledge of special education belong to two mutually isolated knowledge systems, making it difficult for students to acquire integrated “dual competence in general and special education.” The underlying cause of this dilemma is not merely a matter of adjusting curriculum content but rather a paradigm-level issue — the

deep-seated beliefs, values, and methodologies that govern curriculum design and implementation require a fundamental transformation. Do not number your paper: All manuscripts must be in English, also the table and figure texts, otherwise we cannot publish your paper. Please keep a second copy of your manuscript in your office. When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use the paper for the book or journal in question.

1.2. Core Concepts

The concept of paradigm originates from Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science. Kuhn argued that a paradigm comprises the shared beliefs, values, techniques, and methods of a scientific community, defining the legitimate problems and solutions within a field [2]. This paper introduces the paradigm concept into the study of curriculum, defining curriculum paradigm as the ontological assumptions, epistemological frameworks, methodological norms, and axiological orientations shared by a curriculum community in curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation.

The "general-special separation" paradigm refers to the traditional curriculum model in which general early childhood education and special education are treated as two independent, clearly bounded domains, with curriculum objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation designed separately with little to no integration. The "general-special integration" paradigm advocates for the organic integration and mutual permeation of the two types of knowledge, preparing future teachers with the integrated competence to support the development of both typically developing children and those with special needs.

2. The "General-Special Separation" Paradigm: Dilemmas of the Traditional Curriculum Model

2.1. Core Features of the "General-Special Separation" Paradigm

From the perspective of paradigm theory, the "general-special separation" paradigm exhibits four distinctive features:

Ontological level: Children are essentially categorized into two types — "typically developing children" and "children with special needs." This dichotomy presumes fixed standards of "normal" and "abnormal" development, pathologizing differences as individual deficits rather than recognizing difference as a natural state of human diversity.

Epistemological level: Knowledge of general education and knowledge of special education are constructed as two independent, clearly bounded knowledge systems. The former focuses on typical developmental patterns of young children and group teaching strategies, while the latter focuses on atypical developmental pathways and individualized intervention techniques. These two knowledge systems belong to different curriculum modules, are taught by different instructors, use different textbooks, and rarely intersect.#

Methodological level: Uniform teaching and differentiated teaching are regarded as professional skills belonging to different domains. Mainstream kindergarten teachers only need to master group teaching skills for "average children," while differentiated teaching and behavioral support are considered the exclusive domain of special education teachers.

Axiological level: A value hierarchy of "general education first, special education as supplement" is formed. In curriculum design, the five-domain courses occupy the core position, while special education courses exist only as elective modules on the periphery. 2.2 Page Numbers.

2.2. Practical Dilemmas of the “General-Special Separation” Paradigm

In the era of inclusive education, the “general-special separation” paradigm faces a profound crisis of legitimacy, manifested in three interrelated dilemmas:

Single curriculum objectives: Existing curriculum objectives are primarily designed around the typical developmental patterns of typically developing children, with no clear requirements for future teachers’ competence in supporting children with special needs. After completing the five-domain courses, students can skillfully design health and language activities for typically developing children but lack basic knowledge of how to adapt activities for children with autism or support the participation of children with speech and language disorders in language activities.

Absence of special education content: Although several special education elective courses are offered, competence in supporting children with special needs has not been systematically integrated into the five-domain courses. Students face a “theory-practice disconnect.”

Insufficient practical competence: Practicum and internship placements are mostly in mainstream kindergartens, giving students extremely limited opportunities to interact with children with special needs. Trapped in a practical environment of “seeing only typically developing children, not those with special needs,” students struggle to develop “differentiated teaching” competence and often feel helpless when entering inclusive kindergartens.

These three dilemmas are not isolated operational problems but inevitable products of the structural deficiencies of the “general-special separation” paradigm. Fundamental solutions require advancing a paradigm-level shift.

3. Driving Forces of the Paradigm Shift: Theoretical, Policy-Based, and Practical Logics

3.1. Theoretical Logic: The Paradigm Revolution in Inclusive Education Theory

Since the 1990s, inclusive education theory has undergone a profound paradigm revolution. At the philosophical foundation level, a shift has occurred from the “medical model” to the “social model”: disability is no longer viewed as a defect within the individual but as the product of interactions between environmental conditions and individual differences. At the practical orientation level, a shift has occurred from “deficit remediation” to “environmental support”: the task of education is not to “fix” children but to create inclusive environments that support the development of all children. At the value stance level, a shift has occurred from “segregation” to “inclusion”: every child, regardless of ability differences, has the right to receive appropriate education in mainstream educational settings. This theoretical revolution directly undermines the legitimacy of the “general-special separation” paradigm. If disability is socially constructed rather than inherent to the individual, then all teachers should be responsible for all children, and the boundary between “general” and “special” is artificial and unnecessary.

3.2. Policy Logic: Guidance and Requirements of National Policies

Several recent national policy documents collectively point toward new requirements for the preparation of inclusive early childhood educators. The “14th Five-Year Plan Action Plan for Promoting Preschool Education Development” explicitly calls for “promoting inclusive education,” which means that mainstream kindergartens will admit an increasing number of children with special needs. The “Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers” and the “Professional Standards for Special Education Teachers” specify the competence requirements for general and special education teachers respectively, but inclusive education settings require the integration of both types of competence. The normal education accreditation standards emphasize “outcome-based education,” requiring precise alignment between program objectives and workplace needs — and the workplace needs of kindergarten teachers in

inclusive settings are precisely “dual competence in general and special education.” Continuing to use the “general-special separation” paradigm to prepare teachers can no longer meet the practical needs of early childhood education in the new era.

3.3. Practical Logic: The Driving Force of Practical Needs

An increasing number of mainstream kindergartens are admitting children with special needs, but the vast majority of teachers lack the corresponding competence. Most kindergarten teachers report feeling “overwhelmed” when facing children with special needs, with the most prominent difficulties concentrated in “inability to design differentiated activities,” “not knowing how to adapt teaching strategies,” and “lack of behavioral support techniques.”^[3] At the same time, curriculum reform efforts at some universities have accumulated experience that supports the paradigm shift. Some institutions have attempted to “embed” special education modules into the five-domain courses, explore collaborative teaching by “general education faculty + special education faculty,” and establish inclusive kindergarten practice bases. Although these practices are not yet systematic, they have preliminarily validated the feasibility of the “general-special integration” paradigm.

4. The “Dual Competence in General and Special Education” Paradigm: A Theoretical Construction

In response to the dilemmas of the “general-special separation” paradigm and the imperatives of the paradigm shift, this paper attempts to construct a new curriculum paradigm — the “dual competence in general and special education” paradigm.

4.1. Ontological Foundations of the New Paradigm

The ontology of the new paradigm is built on a reconceptualization of three core concepts: “child,” “development,” and “education.”

Redefining “child”: Every child is a unique individual, with natural differences in developmental trajectories, ability structures, and learning styles. The so-called “normal” and “special” are not essential dichotomies but different positions on a continuum. Recognizing the universality of difference is the logical starting point of the new paradigm.

Redefining “development”: Developmental pathways are diverse and malleable. There is no single “correct” developmental trajectory. Typical and atypical development are not diametrically opposed; the latter should be understood as another form of development, not as “abnormality” or “defect.”

Redefining “education”: Differentiated teaching is not the exclusive domain of special education but an inherent requirement of high-quality education. Providing appropriate educational support for all children — regardless of their ability characteristics — is the professional responsibility of every teacher.^[4]

4.2. Epistemological Framework of the New Paradigm

The new paradigm achieves three important shifts in its conception of knowledge.

From knowledge separation to knowledge integration: Knowledge of general education and knowledge of special education are not two separate domains but an organically integrated whole. For example, in the health domain, physical activity design and sensory integration training strategies are two sides of the same coin; in the language domain, language development promotion and speech disorder intervention complement each other.

From universal knowledge to situated knowledge: Knowledge is not an accumulation of abstract principles but a product of generation, application, and reflection in specific educational contexts. Students need to construct situated practical knowledge through “learning by doing and doing by learning” in real or simulated inclusive contexts.

From technical rationality to reflective practice: Teachers are not skilled executors of predetermined techniques but reflective practitioners capable of diagnosing problems, making judgments, and making continuous improvements in complex situations. [5] This shift requires curricula to move from “teaching techniques” to “cultivating reflective competence.”

4.3. Methodological System of the New Paradigm

The new paradigm constructs a systematic practical framework at the operational level.

“Dual-track embedded” curriculum design: In the five-domain courses, “domain core knowledge” serves as the main track and “special education support strategies” as the embedded track, achieving “mutual advancement and integration of general and special education.” Specifically, the health domain embeds sensory integration training and life skills; the language domain embeds communication strategies and AAC application; the social domain embeds peer interaction and social story methods; the science domain embeds multi-sensory inquiry and tiered instruction; the arts domain embeds art therapy concepts and expressive arts activities.

“Three-phase, six-link” instructional model: Instruction is organized in three phases — “online learning” before class, “teaching-creating-evaluating” during class, and “reflection and improvement” after class — guiding students through six learning links: “exploring new knowledge, introducing new lessons, acquiring new knowledge, applying what is learned, evaluating effectiveness, and reflecting on improvement,” thereby achieving deep learning.

“Three-stage progressive” practicum system: A progressive practicum system is designed, consisting of “basic training (on-campus simulation) — professional observation (inclusive kindergarten observation) — professional internship (1+1 practical training: designing one activity plan for typically developing children + one adapted plan for children with special needs),” enabling students to progressively construct “dual competence” in real contexts.

“Three-teacher collaborative” education mechanism: A collaborative education community of “domain faculty + special education faculty + kindergarten mentor teachers” is established, breaking down disciplinary barriers through joint lesson planning, collaborative teaching, and shared supervision.

4.4. Axiological Orientations of the New Paradigm

The axiological orientations of the new paradigm can be summarized as three key words: equity, quality, and development.

Equity orientation: Every child, regardless of ability characteristics, has the right to receive appropriate education in inclusive environments. The professional responsibility of teachers is to identify and respond to differences, not to screen, classify, or exclude.

Quality orientation: Differentiated teaching is not a supplement or adaptation to “normal teaching” but an inherent component of high-quality education. A curriculum that cannot support the development of all children cannot be called a quality curriculum.

Development orientation: Future teachers are continuously developing reflective practitioners, not skilled technicians of predetermined techniques. The core mission of the curriculum is to cultivate the competence to “learn to teach,” not merely to “learn techniques.”

5. Pathways for Achieving the Paradigm Shift

The paradigm shift requires coordinated advancement across five levels, forming a complete transformation chain.

Value level: Reconstruct curriculum values. Establish “mutual advancement of general and special education” as the core value, making “every teacher responsible for every child” a shared belief of the curriculum community. This transformation is the prerequisite for the

paradigm shift and the most difficult step, requiring continuous theoretical study, case-based inquiry, and practical reflection.

Objective level: Reshape talent development standards. Explicitly incorporate “dual competence in general and special education” into talent development plans, constructing a two-dimensional objective framework of “basic teaching competence + special education support competence.” Each domain course must formulate observable “dual competence” indicators.

Content level: Restructure curriculum knowledge systems. Implement “dual-track embedded” content reform, organically integrating special education support modules into domain courses. This is not a simple addition of knowledge but deep organic integration.

Implementation level: Reconstruct instructional practice forms. Implement the “three-phase, six-link” instructional model and the “three-teacher collaborative” education mechanism, achieving integration of “teaching, learning, doing, and evaluating.” Make full use of multiple venues, including smart classrooms, online learning platforms, and inclusive kindergarten practice bases.

Evaluation level: Redesign competence assessment standards. Construct an assessment system covering five dimensions — “theoretical analysis and application competence, basic instructional design competence, special education support competence, curriculum integration competence, and reflective practice competence” — with multi-stakeholder participation and process-oriented assessment.

6. Conclusion

Moving from “general-special separation” to “general-special integration” is a profound paradigm shift. The core meaning of this shift is that difference is not a defect but a normal state of education; inclusion is not an extension of special education but an inherent requirement of high-quality education; every teacher should be responsible for all children, rather than “referring” children with special needs to others. Only by achieving a full-chain reconstruction from concepts to evaluation can we truly cultivate composite teachers who possess both general education competence and special education support competence. However, a paradigm shift is never achieved overnight. It requires a transformation of beliefs within the curriculum community, institutional support and guarantees, and most importantly, continuous deepening of practical exploration. The value of this paper lies in providing a systematic theoretical framework, but the validity of this framework awaits further empirical research and practical testing. We look forward to the day when, as the concept of “dual competence in general and special education” takes root in people’s minds, the preparation of inclusive early childhood educators can truly achieve the historic leap from separation to integration.

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