

# Practical Problems and Exploration of Paths for Inclusive Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

**With the increasing attention paid to educational equity and quality in society, inclusive early childhood education, as the starting point for young children with special needs to integrate into society, has become increasingly important. Based on the current reality, this paper systematically analyzes the lags in the system, cultural cognition and resources of inclusive early childhood education, as well as the core problems arising therefrom, such as uneven quality of teachers and a single curriculum system. The study points out that the deep-seated causes of the above problems are the lack of top-level design, the imperfect teacher training system, and the misalignment of curriculum evaluation orientation. Therefore, starting from systematic construction, this paper puts forward breakthrough paths including establishing a long-term mechanism, promoting curriculum ecologization, improving teacher quality, creating an inclusive atmosphere and promoting multi-stakeholder cooperation, so as to provide references for promoting the high-quality development of inclusive early childhood education.**

## Keywords

**Inclusive early childhood education; children with special needs; inclusive early childhood education system; curriculum system; teacher training.**

## 1. Introduction

Law of the People's Republic of China on Preschool Education (adopted on November 8, 2024) clearly stipulates on school enrollment for disabled children and preschool special education in Article 28: Local people's governments at or above the county level shall, in light of the number, distribution and types of disabilities of disabled children in their respective regions, coordinate the implementation of various forms of preschool special education [1], promote inclusive education, and encourage special education schools, qualified child welfare institutions and disabled children's rehabilitation institutions to add preschool departments or set up attached kindergartens[1]. This provision reiterates the importance of inclusive education and further indicates that the state has elevated inclusive education from an advanced educational concept to a statutory system that must be systematically promoted through legislation, and has defined the due responsibilities of the government. However, preschool inclusive education in China still faces some practical dilemmas. This paper discusses these dilemmas and puts forward feasible suggestions on this basis, aiming to provide references for the development of preschool inclusive education.

## **2. Challenges Faced by Preschool Inclusive Education**

### **2.1. Lagging System, Cultural Cognition and Resources**

The high-quality development of inclusive early childhood education relies on the coordinated construction of three core elements: system, cultural cognition, and resources. At present, the construction of the system, cultural cognition, and resources for inclusive early childhood education is obviously lagging behind, which restricts its high-quality development.

#### **2.1.1. Insufficient Supply of Institutional Elements**

Insufficient Supply of Institutional Elements Institutionalization is the inevitable path to promote the high-quality development of inclusive early childhood education, which lays a solid foundation for resolving deep-seated contradictions in practice and advancing sustainable development. China's policies on inclusive early childhood education lack independence, and no standardized normative documents specifically governing this field have been issued to date. Relevant provisions are scattered across various policies and regulations, such as the 13th Five-Year Plan for Accelerating the Well-off Process of Persons with Disabilities and the 14th Five-Year Plan for Improving the Development of Special Education[2]. In terms of enforceability, existing policies mostly remain at the level of macro guidance and principled provisions, lacking concrete implementation paths and thus hindering policy implementation. For instance, the Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities and the 14th Five-Year Plan for Improving the Development of Special Education mostly consist of encouraging and supportive clauses, which significantly weaken their implementation effects.

#### **2.1.2. Constraints of Cultural Cognition**

Inclusive education has always upheld the principle that "everyone has the right to equal access to education." However, for a long time, people with disabilities have been marginalized in society. Traditional stereotypes continue to perpetuate biases against them, leading to their existence and needs often being overlooked. They face numerous restrictions in public services and psychological support, and their participation in education is no exception[3]. Consequently, in preschool inclusive education practices, children with special needs are often implicitly perceived as "abnormal" or "inferior," frequently facing invisible challenges such as peer exclusion or teacher neglect in regular kindergartens[4].

#### **2.1.3. Deficiency in educational resources**

The effective implementation of inclusive preschool education relies on a robust resource foundation. However, the development of inclusive preschool education in China faces the dual challenge of high investment requirements and insufficient resource availability. Achieving high-quality development necessitates substantial investments in hardware resources, yet there remains a gap between these requirements and the actual capacity of kindergartens. Research reveals that only 17.9% of principals reported having dedicated special education resource classrooms, while 17.7% stated their kindergartens were equipped with necessary rehabilitation facilities and equipment for children with special needs[5].

### **2.2. The quality of faculty members varies significantly.**

The high-quality development of preschool inclusive education is constrained by insufficient teacher staffing and the relatively low professional competence of some educators.

#### **2.2.1. There is a shortage of teaching staff.**

The teaching staff's professional backgrounds are relatively homogeneous; most current teachers engaged in inclusive education graduated from early childhood education programs and lack systematic training in special education. This has led some teachers to hold misconceptions about inclusive education, believing that children with special needs should attend special education schools. Research indicates that only 0.2% of kindergarten teachers

possess a professional background in special education, and less than 40% have received post-service training in preschool inclusive education[6].

### **2.2.2. The teaching competence is relatively low.**

Influenced by traditional perceptions of roles, most teachers hold biased cognitive frameworks and lack insight and support capabilities, making it difficult for them to effectively observe and respond to children's diverse needs in practice, while also hindering the positive development of their teaching identities. The segregated teaching model between regular and special education teachers results in preschool teachers having limited exposure to children with special needs, while special education teachers lack understanding of preschool educational environments. Operating independently within their respective teaching domains without adequate communication or interaction, this creates professional barriers[7]. The uneven quality of teaching staff is fundamentally constrained by three obstacles—cognitive limitations, competency gaps, and insufficient support—which not only hinder the substantive integration of children with special needs but also restrict the social development of typically developing children, ultimately undermining the high-quality advancement of inclusive preschool education.

## **2.3. Limitations in the curriculum design for kindergarten education**

Curriculum development plays a vital role in inclusive early childhood education. Therefore, to ensure all children receive high-quality education tailored to their individual learning needs, it is essential to prioritize the design of inclusive education curricula and refine their format, content, and implementation strategies.

### **2.3.1. The content of kindergarten curricula tends to be homogeneous.**

It struggles to accommodate the individual differences of young children. Its content and objectives are primarily designed around the developmental patterns of typical children, lacking attention to and support for the differentiated needs of children with special needs. Although inclusive preschool education has begun to take shape, most kindergartens still operate under conditions of information asymmetry, possessing limited knowledge of policies, professional expertise, and educational resources related to special needs early childhood education—particularly lacking the tools and support required to meet the diverse learning needs of children in the classroom[9].

### **2.3.2. The course evaluation system is too simplistic.**

A single curriculum evaluation system (typically centered on general early childhood development indicators) fails to scientifically measure the developmental progress of children with special needs across various domains. Applying a "one-size-fits-all" approach essentially leads to educational inequity. Under such a uniform evaluation framework, children with special needs may experience compromised self-confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, in the absence of systematic curriculum resources and strategic support, teachers face increasing workloads and anxiety, with little assurance of effective outcomes.

## **3. Analysis of the Causes of Issues in Preschool Inclusive Education**

### **3.1. At the institutional level: the systematic nature of policies and the effectiveness of their implementation**

#### **3.1.1. The systemic lack of institutional frameworks**

Currently, there is a lack of policy documents specifically addressing inclusive education in preschool education. When implementing inclusive education, kindergartens are often required to refer to relevant documents from the compulsory education stage, while a comprehensive top-level framework for preschool inclusive education remains absent[10]. The

absence of dedicated legislation for preschool inclusive education is the root cause of its poor systematic coherence and insufficient enforceability, as the framework fails to provide legally binding operational guidelines. Existing laws and policies on preschool education also lack clear requirements regarding resource allocation, staffing, workflow procedures, and reward and penalty mechanisms, leaving preschool inclusive education without a viable implementation pathway and rendering it ineffective.

### **3.1.2. Traditional concepts are rigid and inflexible.**

Influenced by traditional notions, society has failed to foster a conducive environment for integration. Higher authorities have not conducted awareness-raising or educational campaigns to disseminate scientific knowledge about children with special needs to the public, resulting in a lack of accurate public understanding regarding these children. Consequently, in preschool inclusive education settings, parents of typical children often worry about the quality of inclusive education or fear that their children's existing resources will be taken by others. This leads to a cognitive disconnect where "emotional acceptance outweighs behavioral support" in their acceptance of children with special needs entering kindergarten[11]. As a result, these children still face hidden challenges such as peer exclusion or teacher neglect within inclusive environments[12].

### **3.1.3. Imbalanced resource allocation**

The high-quality development of inclusive preschool education relies on adequate resources, while funding is essential for its sustainable growth. However, China currently lacks dedicated funding for inclusive preschool education, and relevant documents governing inclusive education funding also lack specific provisions for fund management[13]. This results in an unstable practical foundation for rehabilitation assistance for children with disabilities, unclear program design, inefficient operational mechanisms, and incomplete supporting systems[14].

## **3.2. At the Faculty Level: The Systematic Deficiency in the Faculty Training and Development System**

The lack of pre-service training and in-service professional development collectively results in uneven quality of inclusive education teachers. The former establishes essential practical foundations, while the latter fails to provide effective continuous professional development, ultimately hindering the overall improvement of preschool inclusive education quality.

### **3.2.1. The lack of pre-service training**

The talent cultivation systems for preschool education and special education require integration, as their training objectives and curriculum emphases differ significantly. Only a few teacher-training universities offer integrated preschool education courses, most of which are elective[15]. Moreover, these programs lack a practical orientation: while a high proportion of courses in preschool education majors focus on integrated education concepts and knowledge, the proportion of skill-and practice-oriented courses remains low[16], resulting in an imbalance favoring theory over practice.

### **3.2.2. The mismatch between training supply and demand under the constraints of established training frameworks**

China's preschool inclusive education teachers face significant demand for in-service training, yet its effectiveness is constrained by factors such as monotonous training models and mismatched content[17]. Relevant surveys indicate that 15.9% of kindergarten teachers report unsatisfactory training outcomes, noting no substantial improvement in their professional competencies or understanding of inclusive education[18]. This inefficiency prevents the training from fulfilling its intended purpose, thereby exacerbating the deficiency in professional competence within China's preschool inclusive education sector.

### **3.3. At the practical level: the inherent contradiction between homogeneous courses and differentiated needs**

#### **3.3.1. The development and adaptation of the course are lagging behind.**

Currently, kindergartens face shortages of resources—including funding, qualified teachers, and appropriate curricula—for implementing inclusive education practices. Moreover, the connection between the general education and special education systems remains weak and deeply fragmented, posing significant obstacles to collaborative inclusive teaching practices[19]. This essentially reflects the inherent contradiction between homogeneous curricula and diverse educational needs. Consequently, although children with special needs are formally integrated into classrooms, their educational integration remains severely inadequate due to curricula and teaching methods that lack adaptation to their specific needs, leaving inclusive education largely confined to the practice of "reading and sitting in regular classes."

#### **3.3.2. The misalignment between the orientation of standardized evaluation and individualized needs**

The current educational evaluation system is often based on the benchmark of typical children, forcing teaching to focus on quantifiable, uniform objectives and narrowing the scope for differentiated instruction. Meanwhile, the lack of process-oriented and diversified evaluation tools and concepts for individual development makes it difficult for teachers to scientifically assess the development of children with special needs, ultimately hindering the establishment of a positive feedback loop between teaching and assessment.

## **4. Strategies for Preschool Inclusive Education**

### **4.1. Establish an inclusive education mechanism**

The establishment of an inclusive education mechanism encompasses two key components: conceptual and policy frameworks, requiring coordinated efforts from national, local, and school levels to uphold the principle that "inclusive education is every child's right"; and environmental resource mechanisms that provide adequate material and human resources for its implementation. Additionally, a curriculum and instructional adaptation mechanism enables teachers to deliver personalized instruction tailored to individual children's needs. Incentive and regulatory mechanisms are crucial for advancing inclusive education— incentive mechanisms stimulate enthusiasm and creativity across all stakeholders, driving continuous enrichment and optimization of preschool inclusive education resources. To ensure effective policy implementation and rational resource allocation, the government has established corresponding regulatory mechanisms, including standardized guidelines for allocating preschool inclusive education resources, which must be strictly adhered to nationwide[20].

### **4.2. Create a positive atmosphere for integration**

As modern society places increasing emphasis on individual differences, we have come to recognize the importance of fostering an atmosphere of friendship, mutual support, and equality. Every preschool child may require integration in certain aspects; each deserves respect and understanding, and possesses an equal right to education. We must provide all children with equal opportunities to participate in classroom activities. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the classroom environment by creating favorable physical and psychological conditions, establishing sound classroom rules, and ensuring the emotional and physical well-being of every child. In an inclusive education environment, children with special needs can develop their social, emotional, and cognitive skills, while typically developing children enhance their problem-solving abilities, empathy, and critical thinking skills.

### 4.3. Multiple parties collaborate to promote the development of inclusive education

A certain number of inclusive education service centers can be established in society to provide professional guidance and regular assessments for schools and families. Through multi-department collaboration, a support system is created for children with special needs, offering rehabilitation services and family guidance to ensure comprehensive coordination. Kindergartens enhance child assessments, develop personalized curricula, improve teacher competence, and maintain timely communication with parents to promote holistic child development. Parents should discuss their children's home behaviors with teachers. Regular evaluations with healthcare providers enable the formulation of targeted plans based on feedback. With advancements in information technology, scientific tools are utilized to meet the physical and cognitive development needs of children with special requirements. Teachers should leverage technology to create teaching resources, such as multimedia courseware, tailored for students with visual or hearing impairments[21].

### 4.4. Promote the ecologization of curricula

The preschool years represent a critical period for children's cognitive and physical/mental development. For children with special needs, this phase offers the optimal window for intervention. Nature-based education in kindergartens stimulates children's curiosity and exploratory abilities. The natural environment provides abundant sensory stimuli that effectively enhance perceptual development. Moreover, through hands-on experiences, children grasp abstract concepts, while natural conditions comprehensively cultivate their motor coordination and physical strength—achievements unattainable through standardized indoor facilities. Drawing inspiration from Nanjing Yong'an Huayuan Kindergarten, which leverages its expansive outdoor spaces—including golden wheat fields, emerald lotus ponds, and fruit-bearing orchards—this institution implements an eco-integrated educational curriculum that fosters holistic and harmonious development through immersion in nature. This nature-based approach enables children to freely explore, learn, and engage in experiential learning. By using tangible elements in the natural environment as inquiry subjects and employing project-based learning methods, children actively construct knowledge and develop critical thinking skills as they identify and solve problems[22].

### 4.5. Improve the quality of teaching staff

To strengthen the development of preschool inclusive education teacher teams and enhance their professional competence for high-quality growth, implementing a combined strategy of "pre-service training + vocational training" serves as a crucial approach to addressing both the quantity and quality challenges faced by these educators[23]. Higher education institutions should intensify the cultivation of inclusive education faculty by adding relevant practical courses that enable students to integrate theory with practice. Furthermore, kindergartens can incorporate training focused on inclusive education themes to improve teacher competencies, incorporating these efforts into performance evaluations to motivate educators. The government should play a leading role by coordinating resources under national policies to establish mechanisms that provide financial subsidies to kindergartens admitting children with special needs.

## 5. Conclusion

Preschool inclusive education serves as a crucial pathway to achieving educational equity and safeguarding the equal development rights of children with special needs, with the "Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China" providing legal frameworks for its standardized implementation. Currently, China's preschool inclusive education faces practical

challenges such as insufficient institutional support, societal misconceptions, and inadequate resource allocation, alongside prominent issues including weak teacher professionalism, homogenized curricula, and simplistic evaluation systems. To advance high-quality development in preschool inclusive education, it is essential to strengthen top-level design, refine targeted policies and sustainable support mechanisms; enhance integrated teacher training programs to improve educators' competencies in inclusive education; promote ecological curriculum transformation and diversified evaluation approaches tailored to children's diverse needs; and foster an inclusive social and cultural environment supported by collaborative efforts from governments, childcare institutions, families, and rehabilitation organizations. Only through comprehensive and systematic measures can we transition from superficial integration to substantive inclusion, ensuring that children with special needs receive appropriate, high-quality educational support during their preschool years, thereby advancing both equity and quality in early childhood education.

## 6. Author Profile

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