

Hotspots and Frontier Evolution of AI Research on Special Education in China: A Knowledge Graph Analysis Based on CiteSpace

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Abstract

This research reviews the research progress, key topics, and development trends of artificial intelligence (AI) in special education in China, takes AI-related literatures on special education from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as samples, and CiteSpace software is used for visual analysis. The result suggests that although publication volume has fluctuated, the overall trend rises. Current research primarily focuses on AI support for special education, intelligent assessment and intervention for children with special needs, and applications of virtual reality technology and so on. Research frontiers have expanded from early focus on autism intervention and single assistive technologies to broader topics such as human-computer interaction, inclusive education, and AI-supported teaching and learning. Future research should strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, cooperation among research institutions, broaden research subjects and age stages, and enhance the educational application of AI in real educational situation.

Keywords

Special education; artificial intelligence; CiteSpace knowledge graph; visual analysis.

1. Introduction

The continuous evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has changed the provision of educational resources, the teaching organization, and the modes of learning support, and provides new technological conditions for special education to more effectively respond to individual differences among students and improve educational accessibility [1]. Currently, technologies such as virtual reality (VR), educational robots, machine learning, and intelligent assessment have been applied into assistive communication, rehabilitation training, and educational interventions of children with special needs [2]. In China, policy deployments related to AI and special education are being progressively strengthened. Development Plan for the New Generation of Artificial Intelligence [3] and Action Plan for Education Informatization 2.0 [4] propose to promote the integration of AI into teaching and learning processes, Action Plan for the 14th Five-Year Period for the Development and Promotion of Special Education incorporates technologies such as big data, VR, and AI into development plan of special education, and request to promote the construction of smart campuses, smart classrooms, and digital educational resources [5]. In the Action Plan for Artificial Intelligence+Education in 2026, it explicitly proposed to develop and apply intelligent assistive devices, which will be used for monitoring, evaluation, and rehabilitation training of special education students, in order to promote the development of inclusive education [6]. From this situation, it can be seen that the application of AI in the field of special education has gradually entered from a relatively general technological advocacy to the deployment stage of specific tasks, relevant research and practice also have important policy basis as support.

Against the backdrop of supportive policies and advancing AI technology, domestic scholars have conducted research on topics such as autism intervention [7], VR training [8], educational robots [9], and intelligent diagnosis [10]. Most existing studies focus on specific disability types, individual technologies, or particular application scenarios, while systematic analyses of the knowledge structure and evolutionary process of this field remain relatively limited. This research takes relevant literatures indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as samples, uses CiteSpace software to analyze annual publication volume, cooperation network of author and institution, keyword co-occurrence and clustering, timeline, emergence situation, etc., in order to reveal the development trend, hot topics, and frontier trends of AI research on special education in China, and provides certain references for subsequent research and localized application of AI technology.

2. Data Sources and Research Methods

(1) Data Sources

The data of this research originated from the CNKI database, and research literatures related to AI on special education in China were selected as the analytical sample. In the selection of literature types, "journal" was adopted to ensure that the samples can be fully related to the research topic, and the search strategy was established based on the core concepts of "special education" and "AI". The specific search query was: SU=("special education" OR "education for intellectual disabilities" OR "inclusive education" OR "learning in regular class" OR "children with disabilities" OR "special children" OR "children with special needs" OR "autism" OR "autistic disorder" OR "intellectual disability" OR "hearing impairment" OR "visual impairment" OR "speech disorders" OR "learning disability" OR "developmental disorder" OR "multiple disabilities") AND ("AI" OR "intelligent education" OR "educational AI" OR "generative artificial intelligence" OR "generative AI" OR "ChatGPT" OR "intelligent technology" OR "educational robots" OR "intelligent robots" OR "virtual reality" OR "augmented reality" OR "mixed reality" OR "intelligent assessment" OR "intelligent diagnosis" OR "intelligent assistive technology"). There was no any publication time limit on literatures in this research, and the search deadline was May 30, 2026, in order to present the development process of AI research on special education in China as fully as possible. A total of 611 paper were obtained through preliminary search. Subsequently, these literatures were screened based on thematic relevance and paper type, excluding duplicates and literature with incomplete source information. Finally, 101 valid papers were obtained after review of titles, keywords, and abstracts.

(2) Research Methods

CiteSpace 6.4 software was used to conduct a visual analysis of knowledge graph on relevant literature in the field of AI in special education in China [11], the time span was set from 2010 to 2026, time slice is one year, node types selected "Author," "Institution," and "Keyword" respectively; Excel was used to organize and count the literatures. First, annual publication volume statistics were used to present the overall development trend of AI research on special education in China, and the process of changes in research attention in this field was analyzed. Second, CiteSpace software was used to draw a keyword time graph, and the evolution process of research topics at different stages can be sorted out from a time dimension. Third, the distribution and cooperation condition of research forces in this field can be grasped by analyzing the collaboration network between the author and the institution. Finally, keyword co-occurrence, clustering and emergence analysis were used to identify the hotspots and frontier trends in the field of AI research on special education in China.

3. Research Results and Analysis

(1) Research and Development Trends

1. Trend Analysis of Publication Volume

According to the annual distribution graph of literature organized by CiteSpace visual analysis data (as shown in Fig.1), a total of 101 papers on AI in special education were published in China between 2010 and 2026, although there were fluctuations in annual publication volume, but overall, it is showing an upward trend, especially after 2022, the growth will be more significant. According to the changes in publication volume, the development of this field can be divided into four stages: germination, heating up, scene expansion, and rapid development.

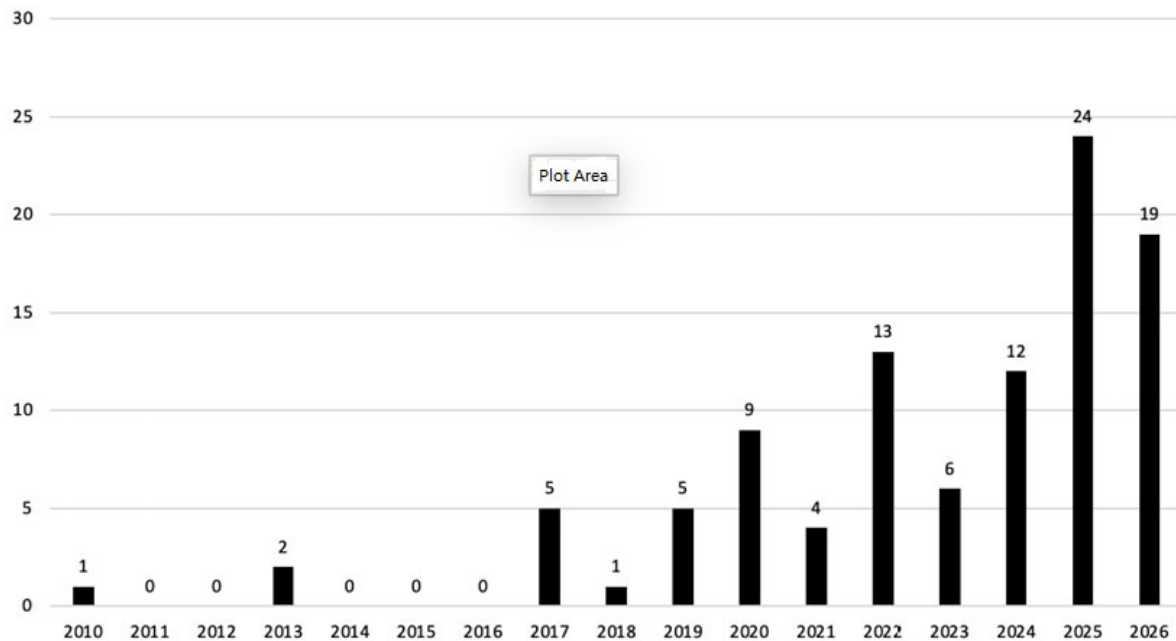


Figure 1. Annual distribution map of literatures on AI research on special education

Note: As of May 30, 2026, the publication volume in 2026, which is not annual data.

From 2010 to 2016, this field was in an embryonic stage, only one paper was published in 2010 and two in 2013; no other papers appeared during this period, research primarily focused on computer-assisted teaching, virtual reality, and interventions for children with autism and a stable research model has not yet been formed. From 2017 to 2020, related research gradually increased, the publication volume rose from five in 2017 to nine in 2020. During this period, China successively released the "Development Plan for the New Generation of Artificial Intelligence" [3] and the "Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan" [4], providing policy support for AI with special education.

During 2021 to 2023, this field began transforming from general technological exploration toward specific educational applications. By 2022, the publication volume reached 13, which is considered a relatively high level at this stage, and this change coincided temporally with the implementation of 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development and Enhancement of Special Education [5] and National Digital Education Strategy Action. Starting from 2024, research entered into a rapid development phase, in 2025, the publication volume reached 24—which is the highest value obtained during the statistical period. From 2024 to 2026, a total of 55 papers were published, accounting for 54.46% of the sample literatures, indicating that AI in special education has become a heated discussed topic in recent years.

2. Author Collaboration Network Analysis

CiteSpace software was used to analyze 101 pieces of, the NodeTypes was selected as "Author" and the Threshold is set to 1, thus visualizing the author's collaborative relationship graph (as

shown in Fig.2), this graph can help us identify key researchers in this field. Collaboration among authors was mainly presented as internal cooperation condition within several smaller teams, meanwhile there were a large number of isolated nodes or researchers with few connections. The literatures of authors such as Chen Liangying, Chen Dongfan, Lei Jianghua, Ding Li, and Sun Yumei has a high level of publication activity or collaborative influence. From the perspective of overall structure, there are relatively few connections different collaborative groups, and a tight collaborative network across teams and institutions has not yet been formed. Combining node color distribution, we can know that most author activities have concentrated after 2020, especially with an increase in collaborative activity in recent years.

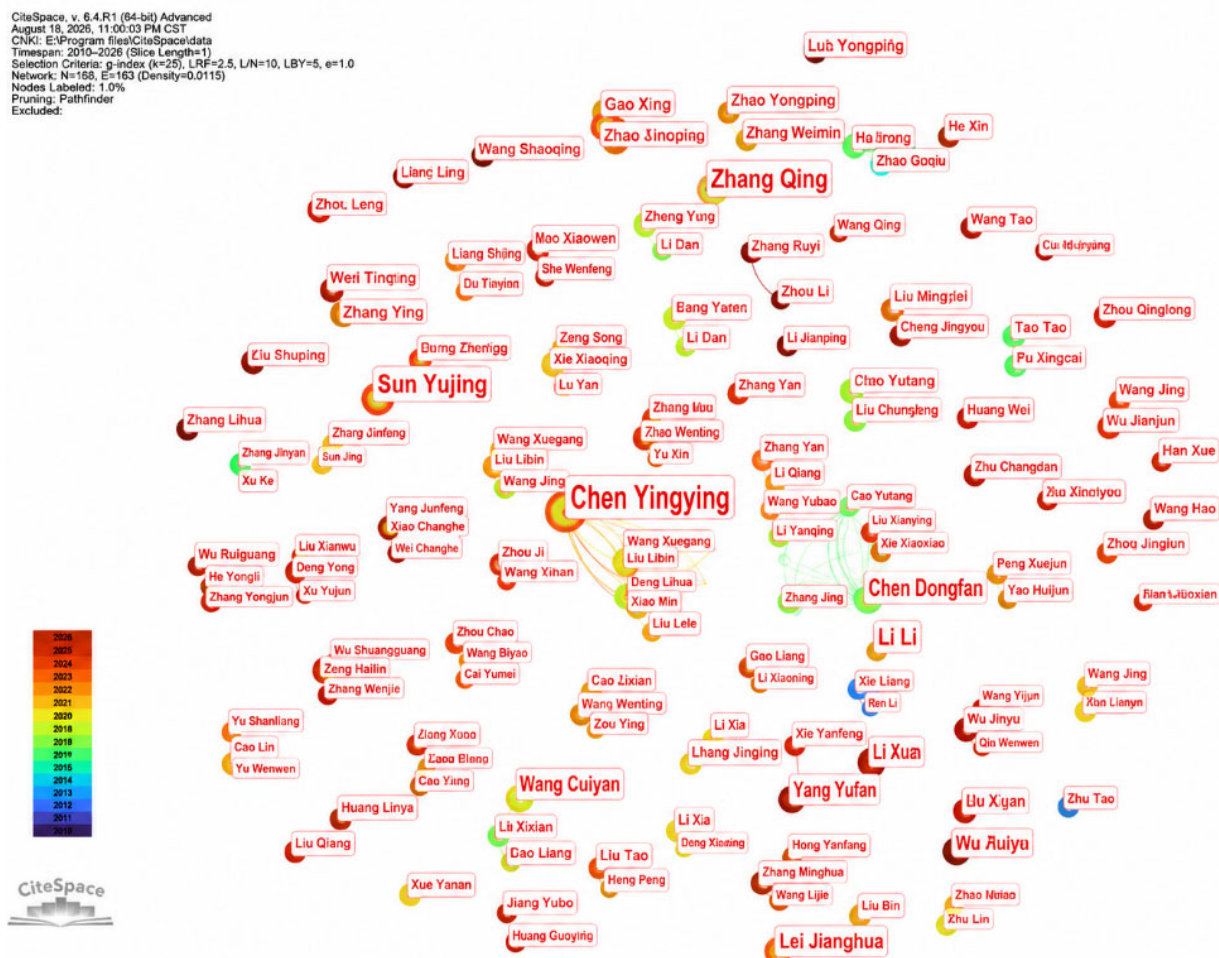


Figure 2. Author collaboration relationship graph

3. Institutional Collaboration Network Analysis

CiteSpace software was used to analyze the 101 pieces of data, NodeTypes was selected as Institution, the Threshold was set to 1, and visual institutional collaborative relationship graph (as shown in Fig.3), this graph can help us understand the main publishing institutions in this field. The School of Education at Central China Normal University published the highest number of papers—reached six, the Department of Rehabilitation Science at East China Normal University and the School of Education at Shaanxi Normal University each published three papers, other institutions, including the Faculty of Education at Guangxi Normal University and the National Engineering Research Center for E-Learning, also had published certain papers. Currently, the preliminary academic core has been initially formed, including normal universities and their schools or institutes related to education and rehabilitation, while there

are relatively few connections among other institutions, and most of them conduct independent research.



Figure 3. Institutional collaborative relationship graph

(2) Research Hotspots Analysis

1. Co-occurrence of Keywords

CiteSpace software to analyze 101 pieces of data NodeTypes was selected as Keyword, the Threshold was set to 2, and visualize the co-occurrence graph of keywords (as shown in Fig.4). Keyword co-occurrence analysis can partly reveal the hot topics in the AI field of special education. From the co-occurrence graph of keywords, it can be seen that "AI" is the most prominent core keyword in the entire network, forming strong connections with keywords such as "special education", "virtual reality", "intervention", "autism", "inclusive education", and "machine learning", AI technology has become an important core topic connecting special education theory, educational practice, and technological applications. Nodes such as "special education," "virtual reality," "autism," and "intervention" also have a high occurrence frequency and constitute the main research hotspots in this field. At present, a wide range of knowledge connections have been established in this field, but the network still appears quite loose in general, and the deep cross-integration among different research topics still needs to be further improved.

CiteSpace, v. 5.4.R1 (64-bit) Advanced
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 CNKI: E:\Program files\CiteSpace\data
 Timespan: 2010-2026 (Slice Length=1)
 Selection Criteria: g-index (k=25), LRF=2.5, L/N=10, LBY=5, e=1.0
 Network: N=153, E=340 (Density=0.0277)
 Largest 1 CCs: 100 (65%)
 Nodes Labeled: 1.0%
 Pruning: None
 Modularity Q= 0.6222
 Weighted Mean Silhouette S=0.6704
 Harmonic Mean(Q, S)=0.7652
 Excluded:

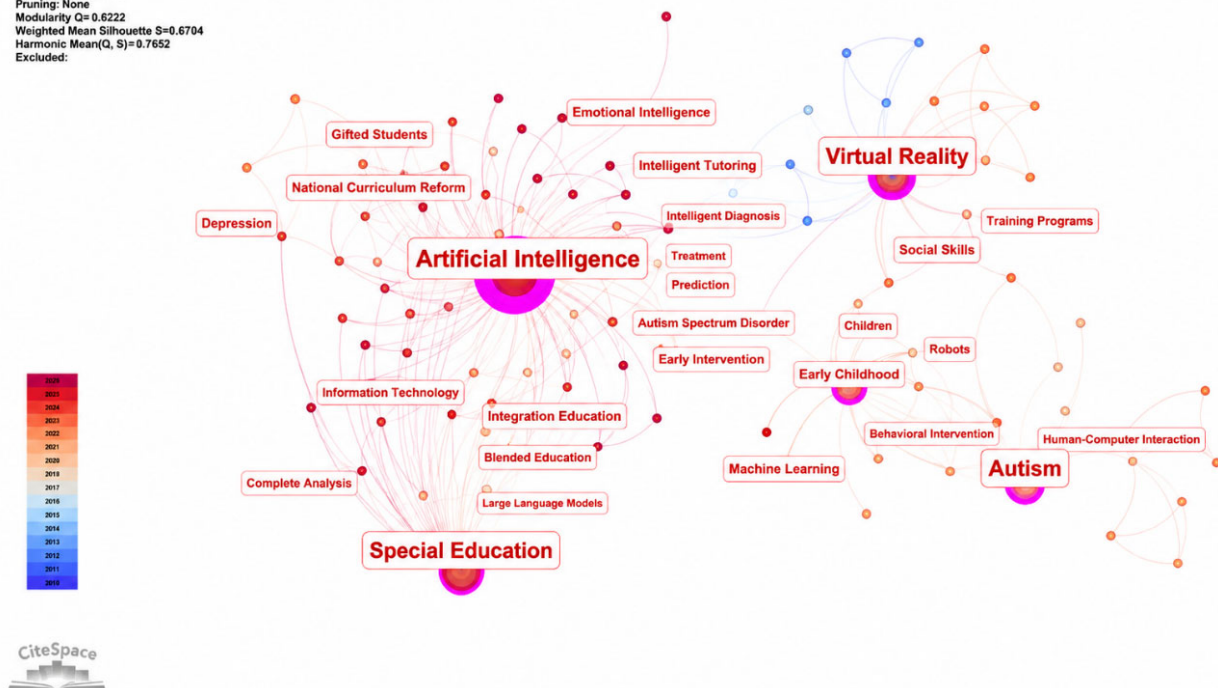


Figure 4. Co-occurrence graph of keywords

2. Cluster Analysis of Keywords

By drawing the co-occurrence graph of keywords and conducting cluster analysis on the graph, a keyword cluster graph was formed (as shown in Fig.5. The module value Q of the keyword cluster graph was 0.6222, which was greater than the commonly used judgment standard of 0.3, indicating that the network clustering structure was significant; the weighted average contour value $S=0.9704$, which was significantly higher than 0.7, it suggests that internal consistency within the cluster was strong and the reliability of the clustering results was good [11]. The graph mainly presents six clear topic clusters.

(1) Core Topic of the Integration of AI and Special Education

The cluster size of "special education" is very large, which mainly includes keywords such as "AI", "special education", "inclusive education", "information technology", "big data" and "technology empowerment. The relevant research focused on exploring the role of AI in the digital transformation of special education, the implementation of inclusive education, and the allocation of educational resources. Compared with single technology application research, this cluster focuses more on the impact of AI on the overall development of special education, involving individualized education support, resource allocation optimization, and special students' learning participation. It indicates that domestic research has extended from specific technological applications to the construction of special education models and issues of educational equity.

(2) Intelligent Intervention and Rehabilitation Support for Special Children

The "intervention" cluster involves keywords such as "intervention," "diagnosis," "assessment," "autism," "machine learning," "augmented reality," "children," and "social skills." The research focus of this cluster is the application condition of AI in screening, diagnosis, evaluation, and intervention of special children. Among them, social communication training, behavior recognition, and individualized intervention for children with autism have received more

attention [12]. Machine learning is mainly used for behavioral data analysis and risk prediction [13], while augmented reality technology can create a contextualized training environment for special children [14]. This cluster is tied to the developmental needs of special children, presenting a research trend of intelligent technology expanding from auxiliary recognition to intervention support.

(3) Immersive Learning Environments and Educational Applications

There are keywords such as "virtual reality", "intelligence training schools", "education", "dilemma", "scope review", and "collaborative experience" in the clustering of "virtual reality". This type of research utilizes virtual reality technology to establish a safe, controllable, and repeatable learning environment, helping special children conduct life skills learning, social interaction training, cognitive training, and vocational education. According to the cluster contents, it can be seen that virtual reality entered into the field of special education research earlier, and researchers have also begun to use methods such as scope reviews to examine its application effects and evidence basis. The research focus has changed accordingly, early studies mostly explored whether virtual reality technology can be used for special education, while recent studies have focused more on its applicable objects, application scenarios, and teaching tasks.

(4) Technological Empowerment and Support for Special Students

The "artificial intelligence technology" cluster mainly centers around keywords such as "ai", "educational assistance," "special students," and "teaching according to aptitude." Relevant studies focus on how to use AI to identify students' learning differences, then develop personalized learning plans, and assist teachers in making teaching decisions through real-time feedback and data analysis [16]. The emphasis of this topic is not merely on improving the level of technology usage, but on allocating educational support according to the actual needs of special students, thereby improving adaptability among teaching contents, support methods, and individual requirements.

(5) Language Assessment and Human-Computer Interaction

The "language ability" cluster includes keywords such as "language ability", "human-computer interaction", "educational assessment", and "diagnostic evaluation", the research contents mainly include the recognition, communication assistance, and intelligent assessment of language abilities of special children. Researchers can analyze children's language expression, pronunciation performance, communication behavior, and learning process by utilizing technologies such as speech recognition, natural language processing, and multimodal interaction, although this cluster size is not large, the research subjects and technical direction are relatively clear, indicating that language and communication ability assessment has become a specific direction for the application of AI in special education.

(6) Interactive Mechanisms Supported by Intelligent Technologies

The "interaction model" cluster is linked to "inclusive education", "AI", and related interaction nodes, focusing on changes in human-computer interaction, teacher-student interaction, and peer interaction modes. Related studies investigate how technology influences interactive processes, teaching relationships, and classroom organization in special education [18]. Therefore, when evaluating the educational role of AI, it is not only to assess technological function and intervention effects, but also to notice its potential impact on teacher roles, student engagement, and peer relationships.

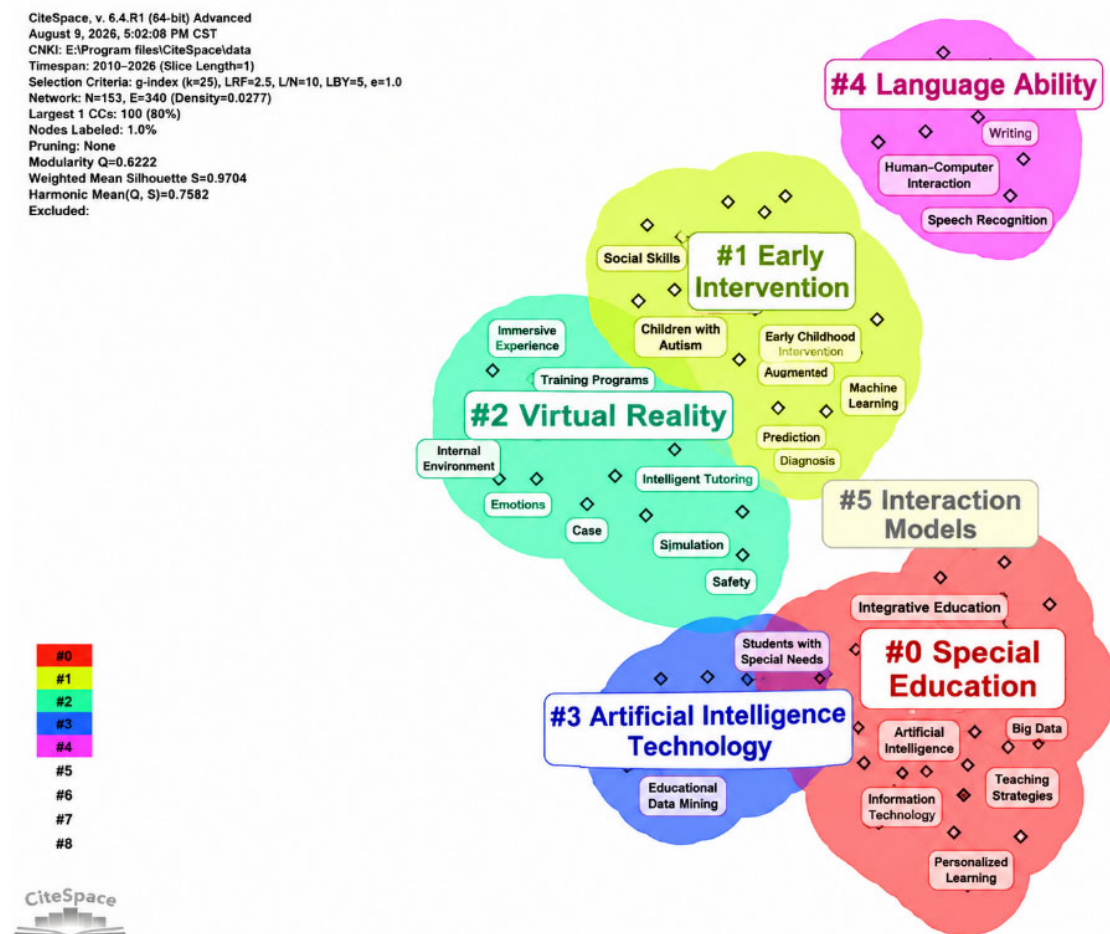


Figure 5. Cluste graph of keywords

(3) Analysis of Research Frontiers and Evolutionary Trends

1. Keyword Timeline Analysis—Development Stages of Research Topic

On the basis of the aforementioned cluster results, the keyword timeline graph further reveals the emergence time, duration, and evolution of different topics. The graph shows (as shown in Figure 6) that AI research on special education in China presents distinct development stages. Around 2010, research mainly focused on cognitive, language, and behavioral interventions for children with autism, showing early signs of approaching it from the perspective of specific educational and rehabilitation needs. Starting from 2013, virtual reality technology gradually began to be applied in learning training, life skills development, and curriculum development for special children, and research scenarios have expanded from single interventions to classroom teaching and school education. During 2018 to 2022, keywords such as "AI," "machine learning," and "robot" appeared frequently, and AI research on special education had shifted from single technology applications such as virtual reality to comprehensive research based on algorithms, data, and intelligent systems. Machine learning is mainly applied in the recognition and prediction of special children, while robots and intelligent assessment provide services for social training, behavioral intervention, and educational evaluation. Since 2022, topics such as "inclusive education," "human-computer interaction," "educational empowerment," and "technological empowerment" have become increasingly active, and research focus has begun to shift toward how AI can systematically promote and change special education teaching, personalized support, and educational equity.

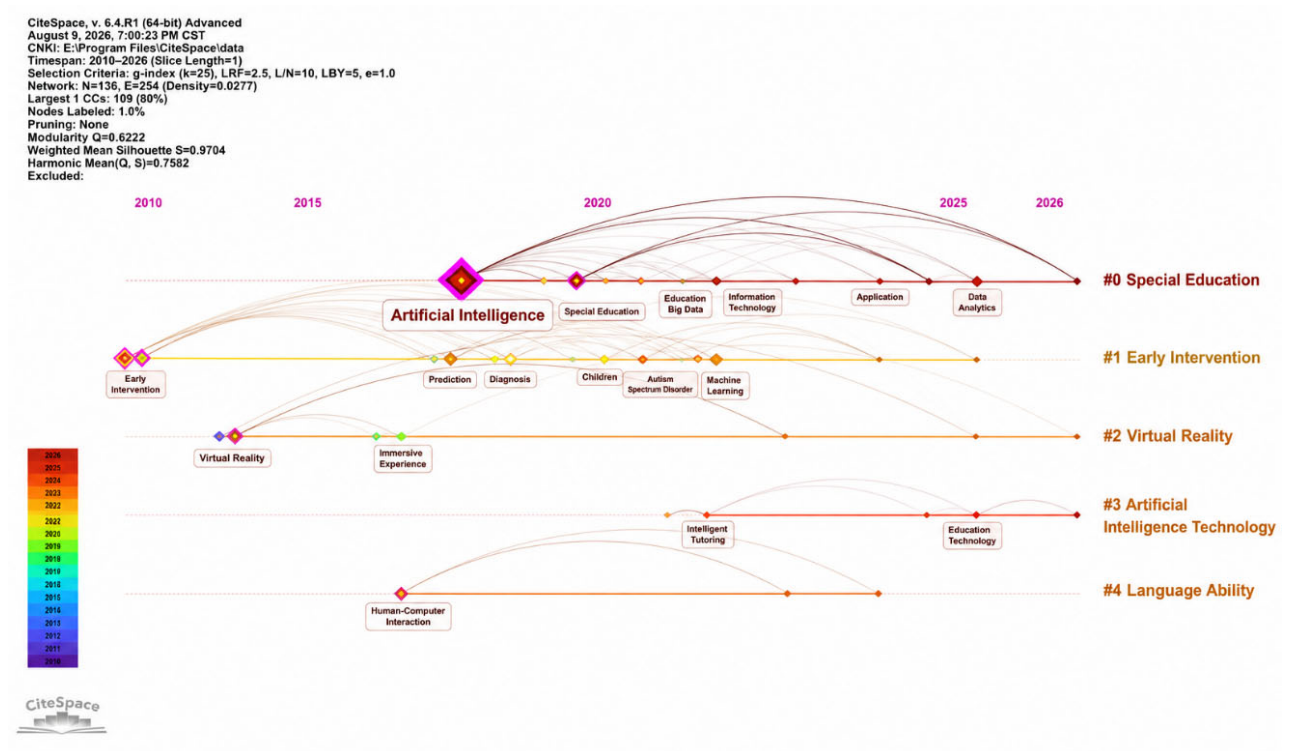


Figure 6. Timeline graph of keywords

Top 12 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

Keywords Year Strength Begin End				2010 - 2026	
Autism	2010	3.12	2010 2020		
Educational Intervention	2017	0.87	2017 2020		
Robot	2019	1.28	2019 2022		
Social Anxiety	2019	0.66	2019 2019		
Anxiety Disorder	2019	0.66	2019 2019		
Social Skill	2021	0.81	2021 2024		
Autism	2022	2.18	2022 2024		
Machine Learning	2022	1.79	2022 2022		
Inclusive Education	2022	0.82	2022 2026		
Human-Computer Interaction	2017	0.92	2023 2024		
Virtual Reality	2013	0.87	2023 2023		
Technology Empowerment	2025	0.87	2025 2026		

Figure 7. Keyword emergence graph

2. Keyword Emergence Analysis - A Stage Shift in Research Frontiers

From the keyword emergence graph (as shown in Fig.7), it can be seen that a total of 12 emergence words were identified through keyword emergence analysis, the 'autism' this emergence word has the highest intensity, reaching 3.12, and its emergence time span is the longest, lasting from 2010 to 2020, and it indicates that research related to autism has received attention from academia over a long period. The emergence intensities of autism and machine learning are 2.18 and 1.79, respectively. Among them, "machine learning" only emerged in 2022, showing the characteristic of rapid growth within a short period. In terms of the time distribution of emergence words, the research focus in this field has undergone significant changes. Early research mainly focused on autism and its educational interventions, then gradually expanding to psychological and social issues, social skills, robot assistance, and other aspects, in recent years, topics such as machine learning, human-computer interaction, virtual reality, inclusive education, and technological assistance have received continuous attention. The 'inclusive education' continued to emerge from 2022 until 2026, 'technology empowerment' emerged from 2025 and continued today, both of the two are currently active research topics. The AI research on in special education in China initially focused on types of obstacles and general interventions, but has gradually expanded to social function support for special children, it is expected that there will be more and more research on the practice topic of inclusive education supported by intelligent technology in the future.

4. Research Conclusion and Prospect

(1) Research Conclusion

This paper reviewed the AI literatures on special education in China from 2010 to 2026, CiteSpace software was used for visual analysis, and reached the following conclusions: in publication volume, AI research on special education in China started relatively late, although annual publication volume have fluctuated, but it shows an overall upward trend, especially the research enthusiasm has significantly enhanced after 2022. In terms of research capacity, some localized authors' collaborative teams have emerged in this field, The research institutions mainly include normal universities and their departments related to education, rehabilitation, and educational technology, some special education schools also participate, however, the connection between the authors and the institutions is loose, and a stable and extensive academic cooperation community has not yet been established. Third, from the perspective of research contents, current research hotspots mainly focus on how AI helps special education, intelligent assessment and intervention for special children, applications of emerging technologies such as virtual reality, personalized educational support, language ability assessment, and intelligent interactive models. Among them, the diagnosis, intervention, and social skills training of children with autism have received considerable attention. Fourth, regarding development trends, AI research on special education in China is gradually shifting from early single auxiliary technologies and specific obstacle intervention towards intelligent assessment, personalized support, and comprehensive applications of educational scenario, The integration of education and technological assistance in the future will continue to receive attention from the academia.

(2) Research Prospect

1. Strengthening Interdisciplinary and Cross-institutional Collaboration

The needs analysis, assistive technology design, rehabilitation intervention, and evaluation of special students determine that current research based on AI needs to be jointly completed by scholars from the fields of special education and educational technology, rather than solely considering technological feasibility or educational appropriateness. Future research should focus on practical issues in special education, and conduct interdisciplinary joint research of

special education pedagogy, psychology, rehabilitation studies, etc., universities, special schools, and rehabilitation institutions should work together to conduct AI education experiments for special children. By leveraging the advantages of teaching convenience of special education schools and technology companies in developing technological products, they can collaborate to develop intelligent assistive devices, assessment tools for special children, personalized education plans, etc. Cross-institutional and cross-regional sampling can be used to expand the sampling range to improve the representativeness of research conclusions and promote the results.

2. Broadening Research Subjects and Age Stages

Current research primarily focuses on diagnosis, intervention, and social skills training for children with autism, and the research subjects are relatively concentrated. Students with vision impairments, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, and other special types of students have different needs when learning with AI. Future research can focus on students with different types of disabilities in special education, conducting research on AI in communication assistance, information access, cognitive training, learning support, and daily life adaptation, etc. The research scope can extend from the current compulsory education stage to preschool or vocational education stages. AI can be applied to early screening and intervention in the preschool stage, and it can also be used for vocational skill development, job support, and social adaptation in adulthood.

3. Enhancing Empirical Research in Real Scenarios for Special Education

There are currently quite a few studies focusing on the technological functions and application ideas of AI in special education, but studies on how to actually use AI in real scenario such as special school classrooms, inclusive education, or individualized courses for special education rehabilitation training are relatively limited. Subsequent studies can explore strategies and effectiveness of applying AI in real scenarios. Observing the changes in skills such as learning participation, language communication, and social interaction of special students in real scenarios such as classrooms and individual training classes, and paying attention to whether the intervention effect can be transferred to other life scenarios. When evaluating the effect of AI in special fields, we can further analyze how long the AI intervention effects last and how it affects real-life abilities, and then break through the limitations of intervention effects that only exist in the short term and enhance the role of AI in the teaching practice of special education.

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