

# Inclusive Education for a More Egalitarian Society

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“Every student can learn, just not on the same day or in the same way.”  
—George Evans

SPECIAL education for persons with disabilities is an integral part of a nation’s education system. However, it is not until after World War II, particularly after the 1970s, that the right to education of children with disabilities garnered widespread attention in the global community. The UN’ agencies released a succession of official papers related to or specialized in this issue, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, *Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons*, *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons*, *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, *Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, and *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Despite the variations in the context and content between these papers, they share the common conception that every society and its government have the responsibility and obligation to provide high-quality education services for children with disabilities to ensure their right to education and protect them from educational discrimination and exclusion (Li, 2023).

The earliest human practice of special education can be traced back to the late sixteenth century, where Pedro Ponce de Leon, a Spanish Benedictine monk, undertook the instruction of certain deaf boys from some of the Spain’s wealthiest families, employing methods of his own devising. In the initial stage of special education, children with disabilities invariably received education in isolation provided by medical or religious institutions. Also, this kind of special education was restricted to children with severe disabilities and focused on the “physiology-based methods” (Liu, 1999). Later, independent special education institutions emerged under the notion that children with disabilities were not suitable to be educated in regular schools. As a result of its rapid development in modern Western countries, special education became a separate education system and research area in parallel with general education (Winzer, 1993).

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With a growing awareness of universal human rights, people began to realize that educating children with special educational needs in isolation was somewhat a discriminatory practice. The ideas of equality and inclusion were infused into special education, and the rights of children with disabilities to the opportunities of participating social and cultural activities and sharing the development outcomes of human society gained legal recognition. In 1975, the U.S. Congress enacted the *Education of All Handicapped Children Act*, setting forth six mandates to secure the rights of children with disabilities and their parents: zero reject, nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation, individualized educational program, the least restrictive environment, legal procedures, and parental involvement (Yu & Hou, 2008). In the UK, the *1978 Warnock Report* recommends that segregated “special” schools should be for those with the most complex, chronic, and multiple disabilities and that mainstream schools should develop to meet the needs of all other children. The 1981 and 1993 Education Acts provide that where possible, children with “special educational needs” should be educated in ordinary classrooms. Subsequently, acts like the *Disability Discrimination Act*, *Special Education Needs and Disability Act*, *Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act*, and *Equality Act 2010* were introduced to reaffirm the right of children with disabilities to education in an egalitarian and inclusive setting (Huang, 2013).

The term “inclusive education” was first officially advanced by the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in the *Salamanca Statement*. The Conference called for all nations to develop inclusive education on the principle of equality and respect and ensure quality education for children with disabilities by drawing on the joint efforts of parents, schools, and the community (UNESCO, 1994). Under the theme of “inclusive education: the way of the future,” the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education in 2008 established inclusive education as the strategy for achieving the universalization of education, marking it becoming the focus of the entire educational field beyond the realm of special education (UNESCO, 2008). Currently, special education has become one of the key areas in educational reform in many countries. The development status of special education is widely regarded as an indicator of the comprehensive level of social, economic, and cultural development of a nation or territory. Inclusive education offers an alternative to the prior educational arrangement for children with disabilities mainly provided by isolated special education schools (Wang & Xiao, 2012). The transition from isolation to inclusion signals a remarkable step forward in special education.

In the issue, *A Review of Inclusive Education Development in China* gives an overview of the history of inclusive education development in China (Du, 2024); *Inclusive Education in China: Complications and Causes* focuses on the challenges encountered in the implementation of inclusive education in China and their causes (Zhou, 2024). It is hoped these articles can inspire more explorations of inclusive education in academia.

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