

# Inclusive Education in China: Complications and Causes

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**Abstract:** *Inclusive education is aimed at giving children with disabilities equality of opportunity in education. The Chinese government has released a host of regulations and action plans concerning inclusive education, defining its direction and setting forth the principle of respect for differences in its implementation. Nevertheless, there remain many challenges in inclusive education development. Among them is the low level of popularization of inclusive education in compulsory education. This article delineates the complications of the implementation of inclusive education in China and analyzes their causes with the intent of contributing to its high-quality development in this country.*

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## **Introduction**

**E**ducational equity is an essential component of social justice. In its modern sense, it means that education should benefit all children of all ages regardless of their physical, mental, social, emotional, or other conditions (Wang, 2015). It is also the central principle underpinning the right of children with disabilities to education. In the context of the modernization of education governance, actively advancing inclusive education is of vital significance for ensuring the equality of educational opportunities for the population of 85 million persons with disabilities (State Council of China, 2021). The notion of inclusive education was first officially put forward in the Salamanca Statement adopted by the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education. It is an educational approach aimed at eliminating segregation in education by creating supportive and inclusive learning environments for all students with differential backgrounds, abilities, and needs. It encourages respect for individual differences, resource sharing, and the creation of a cooperative learning atmosphere. For children with special educational needs, inclusive education has the potential to boost their learning outcomes and social integration (Bai, 2022).

In the past decade or so, the Chinese government has paid increased attention to special education. In the “2017 Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities,” the State Council of China (2017) proposed to prioritize the use of the regular schooling method in special education provision, clarifying the direction for special education development in China. In 2022, the Ministry of Education and six other departments jointly formulated “The Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education in the 14th Five-Year Plan Period,” which emphasizes the adherence to the principles of “inclusion, respect for individual differences, and common growth of children with disabilities and their normal peers.” These principles are based on the student-centered education philosophy, conforming to the genuine educational needs of children with abilities and serving to set the orientation of inclusive education development (State Council of China, 2022). Nevertheless, there are still inadequacies in Chinese inclusive education. According to Deng and Zhao’s (2019) study, about 70% of compulsory school-age children with disabilities in China were enrolled in schools, among whom only 52.2% received inclusive education. There are issues with inclusive education in terms of conceptions, teaching materials, and instructional methods. This article expounds on the complications of the implementation of inclusive education in China and pinpoints their causes in order to contribute to its high-quality development in this country.

## **Complications to the Implementation of Inclusive Education**

Since the 1980s, the practice of “inclusive classes within regular schools” has been the chief form of inclusive education in China (Lan, 2022). According to the Ministry of Education (2022), there were a total of 919,800 special education students in China in 2021, of which 464,100 were enrolled in inclusive classes in regular schools, accounting for 50.45% of the total enrollment of this group. Despite the considerable size of inclusive education, there are issues with it, such as discrepancies between its theory and practice, conflicts between equity and efficiency, and difficulties balancing common and individual needs (Dong et al., 2017). Complications to the implementation of inclusive education are hindering its popularization as well as suppressing its quality enhancement.

### ***Social Misperceptions of Inclusive Education***

Pervasive positive attitudes towards inclusive education are conducive to its popularization, while negative views of inclusive education may hinder its implementation, leading to discrimination against and isolation of children with special educational needs (Yao, 2023). At present, there remain misperceptions of inclusive education among regular schools, parents of special education students, and the general public (Zhou, 2023), negatively affecting its popularization and implementation as well as the psychological well-being and social integration of this special group.

First, many regular schools tend to view inclusive education as merely a category of special education without reaching the realization of the principles of equality, inclusion, and individual rights underlying it. With a superficial understanding of inclusive education, the school cannot grasp its genuine spirit, thus being unable to develop a truly inclusive atmosphere on campus (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, regular schools worry that the implementation of inclusive education may increase their teaching burdens and management complexities. As a result, some schools are reluctant to introduce inclusive education to their campuses. In those that do implement inclusive education, the provision of equipment and resources in this regard is limited, and teachers’ interest and engagement in it remain low (Luo, 2023).

Second, there is a lack of thorough understanding of the purpose and value of inclusive education among most parents of children with disabilities. Many of them tend to see the “problems” with their kids as purely medical but fail to realize that social environments also relate to their physical or mental rehabilitation; the role of inclusive education in creating an equal, inclusive education setting has been disregarded (Ruan, 2023). As per

Zhang's (2021) questionnaire survey on the "perceptions of inclusive education among parents of preschool children with special educational needs," only 6.31% of parents polled realized that for children with disabilities, adaptation to collective environments is more important than intellectual development (Zhang, 2021). Moreover, some parents adhere to the belief that the special education school is the only right choice for their kids with disabilities, an outmoded notion that regards segregation in education as a proper arrangement for children with handicaps (Ruan, 2023). Some others are deeply distrustful of inclusive education, worrying that their kids cannot get adequate attention and support from teachers and are susceptible to discrimination and exclusion in an inclusive class, which may impose adverse effects on their psychological health and social adaptation (Wang, 2021). Parental worries and mistrusts like these lead to their unwillingness to enroll their children in inclusive classes.

Third, the stigmatization of children with disabilities is not rare in society (Tu, 2021). "Special needs" have become a unique label that distinguishes them from the rest of the class in inclusive education and are often seen as disruptions to normal classroom teaching. For example, their physical handicaps may appear to be distractions to their normal classmates; emotional and behavioral problems with some of them are likely to jeopardize classroom order; and their learning difficulties may slow down the teaching pace. The notion that special education students are "incomplete" elicits prejudice and discrimination against them among ordinary people (Ruan, 2023).

Many people hold the view that children with disabilities are only entitled to special education in isolation, and inclusive education is unfavorable to normal students as the participation of special education children is guaranteed to hinder teaching progress and be detrimental to the academic achievement of their classmates (Jing, 2013). Such a view is opposed to the nature of inclusive education, which is about creating an inclusive learning environment that allows all children equal access to high-quality education resources. Often, the strongest resistance to inclusive education comes from the parents of normal students in the inclusive class. In a news report on the compulsory education of rural autistic children published by *The Paper* in 2023, Lin from Hunan Province, the father of a child with autism, was struggling to find his son a proper school that provides inclusive education. His son was diagnosed with autism at the age of three and admitted to an ordinary township primary school following years of special training. However, most parents of other students exhibited strong opposition to the kid's joining the class due to their misconception of autism. They called and e-mailed the principal to demand that Lin's son leave. To Lin, it was a huge irony that the interference in his son's education was from the parents of his classmates (Wen & Dai, 2023).

## ***Conflicts between the Special Needs of Children with Disabilities and the Overall Outcomes of Inclusive Education***

In the implementation process of inclusive education, how to balance its overall outcomes with the special needs of children with disabilities is a pronounced challenge. Because of their special physical or mental conditions, children with disabilities need more attention and support in an inclusive class. Their special needs include specialized teaching materials and methods as well as additional tutoring time, among other matters. How to satisfy these special needs without sacrificing the academic attainments of normal students in an inclusive class is an issue pending further exploration (Zhu, 2023). At the same time, normal students also face the challenge of adapting to inclusive education. They need to spend a considerable amount of time adjusting to the classroom environment, where they must get along with disabled children and develop understanding and acceptance of their special needs. These challenges may bring them severe academic and psychological burdens (Pan, 2023).

In Yao's (2023) investigation of school support for primary education students who participated in the "inclusive classes within regular schools" program, teacher X stated that special education students needed a variety of additional teacher support, which was not always well met given the limited time and energy of the teacher, and that they may lag behind their classmates if they could not get extra backing timely. Teach Y said that he must conduct classroom instruction based on the prepared teaching plan to fulfill the delivery of course content and that it was impossible to slow down the teaching progress for the sake of the special circumstances of a certain student. According to him, the situation at the primary level was manageable, whereas at the secondary level, the whole class was working hard preparing for the high-stakes examinations, and thus, even less attention could be spared to students with special needs.

## ***Unreasonable Curriculum Content for Inclusive Instruction***

A legitimate, inclusive education curriculum is crucial for meeting the needs of special education students as well as supporting their all-round development. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of consideration for the special needs of disabled children in the current inclusive education curriculum, which typically adopts the uniform teaching materials developed for ordinary students (Wang, 2021). Moreover, current teaching in the inclusive class is still fo-

cused on the delivery of content knowledge, disregarding the cultivation of practical competences in special education students. This is actually a deviation from one of the chief objectives of inclusive education: to prioritize fostering fundamental competences such as self-care ability, self-regulation, and social skills in special education students while also helping them develop basic knowledge foundations (Cao, 2022). In her 2022 research into the implementation of inclusive education in Shanghai, Feixian Chen (2022) discovered that there was a paucity of appropriate teaching materials for the teaching of life-based Chinese, mathematics, and practical courses in special classes within regular schools. Nearly half of the teaching protocols incorporated teaching materials that did not suit the ages of special education students; the rest adopted general education teaching materials for ordinary students.

### ***Insufficient Inclusive Education Expertise and Skills of Teachers***

The expertise and skills of inclusive education teachers are instrumental in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Qualified teaching staff in this education stream should hold an in-depth understanding of the principle of inclusive education and be able to leverage effective pedagogical approaches. While providing targeted support for students with special educational needs, they can also fuel the engagement of normal students and the constructive interaction between the two student groups (Hu, 2023). Nonetheless, the majority of teachers involved in inclusive education lack a deep understanding of its purpose and significance and has difficulty accommodating to this advanced educational paradigm (Liu, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of special education experience and skills among regular school teachers also militates against the outcomes of inclusive education. The physical and mental handicaps of special education students necessitate special instructional strategies, which require the use of relevant professional techniques by their teachers, including verbal communication, psychological counseling, rehabilitation skills, and more (Liu, 2021). Baihui Chen (2022) investigated the practice of “inclusive classes within regular schools” in W School in D County in 2022 and found that 82.18% of the teachers who had taught or were teaching in inclusive classes had never received any special education training, pre-service and in-service. All 11 teachers from the primary department of W School reported they had never had special education training experiences before or after special education students joined their classes.

### **Causes of Issues with Inclusive Education in China**

## ***The Low-Level Popularization of the Notion of Inclusive Education***

Inclusive education is not only an alternative to educational arrangements for children with disabilities but, more importantly, signals a significant change in educational ideology and culture. It is aimed at building egalitarian and supportive educational environments for all children. Successful implementation of inclusive education is a crucial step in changing discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, and developing an inclusive society. Despite the growing knowledge about inclusive education in China, the publicity for it is still inadequate, leading to its lower-than-expected development pace in this country (Zhang, 2021). First, governmental involvement in the promotion of inclusive education remains at a minor level. With a paucity of governmental investment in propagating the notion of inclusive education, the public can hardly develop a proper understanding of it (Li, 2015). Second, schools and educators have made few efforts to enhance the comprehension of inclusive education on the part of ordinary students and their parents (Lan, 2022). Third, media outlets in China have not paid much attention to this relatively new education paradigm, let alone publishing in-depth reports on it. Discussions on this topic are rare on social media, resulting in a lack of knowledge about the significance of inclusive education among the general public (Fan, 2021).

## ***A Lack of Consideration of the Peculiarities of Inclusive Education***

While inclusive education is intended to demolish the boundaries between special and regular education to enable students with special needs to share equal schooling settings with their normal peers, it does not mean that inclusive education is equivalent to regular education. In the current implementation of inclusive education, its peculiarities are not fully accommodated due to the following reasons:

### **The Absence of Resource Teachers**

Resource teachers are specialist educators specializing in helping children with learning difficulties develop their cognitive capacities and life skills. Responsible for the planning, operation, and management of resource classrooms, they are central to the functioning of special education resources (Chen, 2005). “The Guidelines for the Construction of Special Education Resource Classrooms in Regular Schools,” issued by the Ministry of Education in China (2016), proposed to normalize the construction and manage-

ment of resource classrooms based on the requirements of the national education strategy and special education upgrading plan. The Guidelines underlined the important role of resource classrooms in advancing inclusive education by providing special education, rehabilitation training, and counseling to students with disabilities at regular schools.

The effects of the resource classroom are contingent on its quality of equipment as well as its proper and full exploitation under the direction of specialist teachers (Liu, 2013). Nevertheless, the absence of a resource teacher is common in most regular schools. Typically, the school appoints an ordinary teacher to take charge of the resource classroom, who may have to concurrently handle the day-to-day teaching or administrative affairs of the school. As a result, the teacher's time and energy spent in the resource classroom are limited. Worse still, due to their lack of professional expertise in special education, the psychology of children with special needs, and other relevant areas, the ordinary teacher is incapable of making the best use of the resource classroom (Yao, 2023). Thus, without the professional support of resource teachers, inclusive education can hardly be realized in its genuine sense.

## A Paucity of Specialized Teaching Materials

At present, most schools that implement inclusive education stick to the uniform teaching materials for ordinary basic education students. These teaching materials give no consideration to the characteristics of special education students, thus making them unable to meet their academic needs. Without specialized teaching materials, teachers lack a framework of reference for conducting inclusive education, resulting in compromised teaching outcomes (Chen, 2022). As a result, the distinction between inclusive and regular education is blurred. According to Wu's (2014) study, the irrelevance of course designs to the needs of special education students is one of the leading reasons for the less-than-ideal effects of inclusive education. He claimed that many regular schools ignore the special learning needs of this group and have not adjusted the course content and difficulty from the standpoints of their special learning objectives, assessment methods, and learning interests. Liao (2017) noted in his study that special classes deployed in regular schools have used textbooks for regular compulsory education students over the years, resulting in the disconnection between the teaching content of special classes and the national special education curriculum as well as the poor achievements of inclusive education.

## Limitations of Big-Size, Class-Based Instruction



Under the big-size-class-based instructional paradigm, the teacher tends to address the whole class with the prescribed teaching materials and pace, having difficulty accommodating the special needs of students with disabilities (Du, 2022). There are big differences in physical and mental features and learning capacities between special education students and their normal peers, which necessitate the teacher paying additional attention to the former. Yet, in a large class, the first consideration of the teacher is to keep the learning progress of the majority of students on schedule. It is impossible for the teacher to pay proper regard to the learning rate and cognitive capability of each individual student with special needs; thus, it is difficult for the latter to keep pace with their classmates and truly integrate into the class (Guan, 2022). In addition, conventional class-based instruction is typically teacher-centered, placing a biased emphasis on content knowledge imparting and test-skill training (Chu, 2021). Nevertheless, students with disabilities in inclusive education need a child-centered teaching pattern that focuses more on teacher-student interaction, hands-on experiences, and tailored tutoring. The difficulty in adapting the class-based instruction pattern to the requirements of inclusive education is a major impediment to the successful implementation of the latter (Zhu, 2023).

## Unreasonable Evaluation Systems

Currently, Chinese primary and secondary schools stick to the traditional common criterion-based evaluation system, an assessment framework based on the needs of the majority of students without adequate consideration of those at the “two ends” of the normal distribution, namely gifted students and students with learning difficulties. Evaluation systems as such give little regard to the individual differences among students (Tang, 2016) but are adopted by many schools implementing inclusive education, where the performance of students with disabilities is measured mainly by their examination results rather than their development in multiple aspects, including social and emotional abilities (Zeng, 2024). Such measurement can only elicit frustration in most special education students, who are at a disadvantage compared with ordinary students in terms of academic achievements (Yin, 2023). Also, the test-results-focused evaluation system is ineffective in assessing the instructional outcomes of inclusive education, thus unfavorable to its long-term development (Huang & Du, 2022).

## ***Insufficient Assistance from Educational Technology for Inclusive Education***

In the era of information technology, educational technology plays an important role in serving the diverse needs of students and increasing educa-

tional outcomes. 2022's "The Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education in the 14th Five-Year Plan Period" advocates leveraging digital technologies, such as the Internet, cloud computing, big data, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, to support the construction of smart campuses and classrooms for special education, where possible; promoting the exchange and sharing of data related to special education; and developing digital teaching resources for special education courses and expanding the coverage of high-quality special education resources (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Providing personalized instruction to various special education students is a primary aim of inclusive education; its achievement can be facilitated by the application of educational technology. Technological devices such as smart teaching platforms and virtual-reality classrooms have the potential to give special education students more choices of education resources and richer learning experiences (Ge & Hu, 2019). Nevertheless, because of financial and technical constraints, many regular schools cannot afford to adopt these advanced digital devices in their inclusive education. According to Dong's (2022) investigation of the classroom engagement of hearing-impaired students enrolled in inclusive classes at primary schools in Hefei Province, the FM wireless frequency modulation system and instant voice translation application for students with hearing impairments were not available at most ordinary schools. Student A said that he had difficulty engaging in the in-class discussion because he could not hear well in a noisy environment and that even in the pair discussion, his deskmate had to yell for him to hear clearly (Dong, 2022).

In the meantime, it is hard for inclusive schools to seek out inclusive education-targeted, high-quality applications to modernize their administration and service (Yang, 2021). In their survey of nearly 300 students from Xiangcheng District of Suzhou City enrolled under the "inclusive classes within regular schools" program, Hu et al. (2023) spotted a host of issues with the administration of inclusive education, such as complicated application procedures for the inclusive class, the lack of coordination and sharing between resource centers, the absence of supervision over the education quality of resource centers, the shortage of a window for parents into special education services, and more. Therefore, the construction of internet-based cloud service platforms for inclusive education is a critical step in improving its service system.

## ***Issues with Inclusive Education Staff Training***

Inclusive education poses higher requirements for the professional competence of teachers. In 2022, the Ministry of Education of China's Teacher Education Department and the United Nations International Children's Emer-

gency Fund jointly released “The Action Plan for Enhancing the Professional Competence of Chinese Teachers in Inclusive Education,” which asserts that the strengthening of inclusive education capacities of frontline teachers is crucial for achieving high-quality inclusive education in China (China Youth Daily, 2022). Nevertheless, there are inadequacies in teacher training on inclusive education, both pre-service and in-service.

Pre-service training on inclusive education is meant to help teachers develop structured expertise and skills in this regard in order for them to better serve the needs of special education students in their future careers (Wang, 2023). Yet, the current teacher education on inclusive education in China provided by teachers’ colleges and other teacher education institutions is incomplete, inducing various negative consequences. Many teacher candidates failed to develop a thorough understanding of the core idea and value of inclusive education, which led to their inability to implement it in its real sense in their future teaching practice. Also, the implementation of inclusive education entails the expertise and techniques of special education, which are somehow not seriously covered in their pre-service programs. This makes them feel incompetent in confronting children with special educational needs (Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, current teacher pre-service education does not mandate a placement related to inclusive education, which substantially reduces the chances for them to learn specific instructional methods and techniques in authentic inclusive education settings (Wang, 2022).

Issues with teacher in-service training on inclusive education are also pronounced. The training content is not comprehensive, with a biased emphasis on theoretical knowledge, such as special education psychology and evaluation, over practical manipulation skills. That weakens teachers’ abilities to apply special education theories to their actual interactions with special education students (Guo, 2022). Furthermore, current in-service training on inclusive education is insufficiently engaging, mainly taking the form of courses and lectures, where there is a dearth of practical demonstrations and interactions (Jing et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a lack of professional training staff and other training resources, mainly due to the inadequate investment of local governments and schools in inclusive education-specific teacher training, and as a result, quality training in this area cannot be guaranteed (Chen, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the advances China has made in enhancing educational equity and ensuring the rights of children with disabilities to education through inclusive education, there are multiple challenges it faces. These challenges are impeding the popularization and quality improvement of inclusive education.

Looking to the future, the development of inclusive education is a long-term, arduous endeavor that requires the engagement of society as a whole. It is not only an effective measure for guaranteeing children with disadvantages and disabilities equal education opportunities but also of vital significance for building a more civilized world that encourages integration and rejects discrimination.

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