

A Review of the Current Status of China's Inclusive Education Policy

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Abstract:

With the progress of society and the continuous updating of educational concepts, China's special education field is undergoing a significant transformation from traditional segregated education to an inclusive education model. This transformation aims to provide students with disabilities with more equal and inclusive educational opportunities. However, the in-depth development of inclusive education still faces many practical challenges, which are manifested in key issues such as uneven resource allocation and a shortage of professional teaching staff. To systematically address these developmental difficulties and explore effective solutions, this paper focuses on the relevant policies of inclusive education in China and conducts in-depth research, aiming to provide a crucial theoretical basis and clear development directions for solving these problems. The study primarily approaches from two core dimensions: the evolution of policies and the core target objects of policies, to comprehensively review the current development status and existing deficiencies of inclusive education policies. The comprehensive analysis indicates that China's special education policy system has achieved significant results in ensuring the equal rights of students with disabilities to receive education, with the institutional framework continuously improving. However, the study also points out that to promote the high-quality development of inclusive education in the future, it is necessary to further strengthen the dynamic adjustment and precise implementation of policies, increase financial input, improve the long-term mechanism for teacher training, and promote the in-depth empowerment of special education by technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Inclusive education; special education; children with disabilities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education, also known as Inclusive Education, is a special education concept formally proposed in the Salamanca Statement adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 [1]. Through differentiated educational design and adjustment, it helps disabled children enter ordinary classes for undifferentiated learning, enabling them to study and grow together with non-disabled students in a general educational environment. This is not only an important manifestation of the right to education for disabled children, but also a crucial way to ensure that each student can obtain appropriate educational support according to their individualized needs. With the progress of society and the renewal of educational concepts, special education is undergoing a major transformation from segregated education to inclusive education. However, the integrated development of current special education still faces many challenges, including issues such as uneven resource allocation and a shortage of professional teachers. In-depth research on relevant policies will provide an important basis and development directions for solving these dilemmas. From the perspective of social development, the improvement of the concept of human rights and the enhancement of social inclusiveness have made the rights and interests of special groups increasingly valued. The demand of disabled students for equal educational opportunities in the mainstream educational environment is becoming stronger and stronger. The transformation of educational concepts also makes people realize that every student has unique learning needs and development potential. Regardless of their physical or intellectual status, they should receive education in a common educational environment to fully develop their diversity and individual value. It is worth noting that, as one of the countries with the largest number of disabled children in the world, some disabled children in China still fail to obtain the due educational opportunities due to reasons such as economic difficulties. Coupled with practical problems such as the unbalanced allocation of special education resources and the insufficient number of teachers, it is urgent to improve through policy guidance. In recent years, the continuous improvement of laws and regulations such as the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China has not only clarified the objects of special education and their right to education, providing a solid legal guarantee for the development of inclusive education, but also promoted the continuous optimization and progress of the inclusive education policy system.

1.2 Inclusive Education

The special education policy for disabled students in China focuses on building a high-quality education system. The policy clearly takes appropriate integration as the goal and follows principles such as government leadership and precise policy implementation. It aims to initially build a high-quality special education system by 2025 and achieve a 97% enrollment rate of school-age disabled children in compulsory education. The content covers various aspects, including: improving the special education system, promoting the development from preschool to higher education stages, and strengthening the layout of special education schools and resources; deepening inclusive education, promoting the integration of general and special education, vocational and special education, as well as the integration of medical rehabilitation, information technology and special education, and exploring the training mode for children with autism; improving the guarantee mechanism, increasing relevant funding investment, improving the treatment and professional level of teachers, ensuring the supply of school-age places, and improving school-running conditions. In addition, the student status management is more refined, providing personalized services according to the types of disabilities, and the special college entrance examination policy is also more humanized.

1.3 Research Theme

The policy promotes the -all-round development of disabled students and helps them integrate into society by building an inclusive education system. At the same time, it also reflects the country's humanistic care for vulnerable groups, which is of far-reaching significance for enhancing social inclusiveness and building a harmonious society.

It explores the role of policies in solving problems such as difficulties in enrollment of disabled students and uneven educational resources; it combines real-world cases to analyze the difficulties in policy implementation and the directions for improvement.

The main part of this research analyzes the policy content, implementation effects and existing problems; at the end of this paper, based on the current situation, optimization suggestions are put forward, covering improving laws and regulations, strengthening resource coordination, and enhancing teacher training, etc., to form a systematic research framework.

2. Research Methods and Process

In the literature retrieval stage, the academic platform CNKI was used. In the specific operation, keywords such as "Chinese disabled students", "Chinese disabled chil-

dren”, “Chinese special education policy”, “under the background of inclusive education”, “development trend”, “since the 21st century”, “education fairness policy”, “education/preschool education for the disabled in China” were adopted. At the same time, to ensure the quality and timeliness of the literature, a series of screening instructions was set. The time range was limited to the 21st century, specifically screening literatures related to inclusive education during 2010-2025, and giving priority to literatures published in Peking University Core Journals and included in CSSCI with relatively high citation frequencies, to lay a solid data foundation for subsequent research.

During the specific retrieval, keywords such as Chinese disabled students, Chinese disabled children, Chinese special education policy, development trend under the background of inclusive education, education fairness policy since the 21st century, education/preschool education for the disabled in China were used to search for research on educational issues of urban migrant children from the perspective of developmental social policies, education and policy analysis of rural left-behind children, quantitative analysis of educational policies for migrant children in China from the perspective of policy tools, and a review of legislation and policies for disabled children in the past 30 years. It can be precisely narrowed down to the educational policies for a specific category of “vulnerable children”. Literatures involving the overly broad and macro concept of “vulnerable children” that cannot focus on explaining the research subject were deleted. Finally, 15-20 literatures were selected as references.

3. Findings

3.1 Research Theme

According to the law of development of inclusive education, whether in China or in other countries, inclusive education originates from special education. Special education is the foundation for the development of inclusive education. Using historical institutionalism as an analytical framework, some scholars have pointed out that China’s special education policy changes are still led by the state, with a strong path dependency [2]. The introduction of the concepts of international organizations and external drivers drove the development of special education in China. The 1993 Harbin Declaration introduced the concept of inclusive education, which is widely practiced in the West, into the country, and as a result, China began to actively promote learning in regular classes. From the perspective of policy ethics, some scholars have argued that from the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China to the present, special education policies have gradually begun to care about the quality of individual

survival and well-being of life, reflecting the policy ethics of “people’s livelihood-people-oriented” doctrine [3]. On this basis, some scholars take the occurrence orientation, process orientation, purpose orientation and policy discourse orientation as the analytical framework, arguing that China’s special education policy discourse has been expanding and extending from the “economics discourse” centered on economic construction since the reform and opening up, involving social, ethical and management aspects, and that the discourse orientation tends to be pluralistic, and that the proposal of integrated education reflects the shift from an efficiency-centered policy mode to an equity-centered policy mode, and is a realistic manifestation of the government’s humanistic approach. The proposal of Inclusive Education reflects the shift from an efficiency-centered policy model to an equity-centered policy model, and is a realistic manifestation of the government’s humanistic orientation [4]. Then, taking the special education policy as the background, Pang Wen, by constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework for Inclusive Education in terms of concept, policy and practice, points out that the development of Inclusive Education is a policy choice made by the Communist Party and the government based on the deepening of the understanding of the ruling concept and the value of education in the process of promoting the special education policy [5]. From the perspective of the core implications of Inclusive Education, equity, differentiation and effective integration are the core implications for the quality development of Inclusive Education and key indicators of the level of development and modernization of Inclusive Education [6]. Some scholars have pointed out that, at present, China has basically formed a pattern of education for persons with disabilities, with special education schools as the backbone, learning in regular classes and attached special education classes in regular schools as the mainstay, and supplemented by home-schooling and family and community education [7].

3.2 Research on the Target Audience of the Policy

3.2.1 Research on teachers

In the newly revised Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities in 2017, China proposed that “priority be given to establishing special education resource classrooms in some ordinary secondary schools, equipped with the necessary equipment and teachers and professionals specializing in education for persons with disabilities”, and that teachers, as one of the recipients of Inclusive Education and learning in regular classes, play an important role in the implementation of the policy of Inclusive Ed-

ucation and the promotion of learning in regular classes. Regarding the status of teachers in Inclusive Education, Li La believes that the special nature of teachers learning in regular classes has not yet been highlighted, and that they can only apply for teaching qualifications corresponding to their subject specialties according to the nature of the school they work in, just as other teachers in regular schools do, and that the teaching work they do in Inclusive Education is at best part-time rather than full-time. 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. When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use [8]. On this basis, some scholars have pointed out that Inclusive Education teachers refer to highly qualified classroom teachers and classroom teachers in ordinary schools who are equipped with the literacy of Inclusive Education and can cope with the different needs of the students, and under such a viewpoint, the authors believe that all classroom teachers and classroom teachers in ordinary schools should become teachers of Inclusive Education [9]. Even so, the Guidelines for the Construction of Special Education Resource Classrooms in Ordinary Schools, issued by the General Office of the Ministry of Education in 2016, still did not form a uniform regulation on the job duties of Inclusive Education resource teachers. This makes Inclusive Education teachers often forced to take on a wide range of tasks far beyond their job responsibilities, making them unable to recognize their own work and individual values, which leads to an identity crisis and abandonment of the profession [10]. Moreover, most of the Inclusive Education courses in China's current teacher training colleges and universities have the main goal of "equipping ordinary teachers with certain knowledge and skills in special education". Although this has a certain degree of scientificity and reasonableness, there is still a certain deviation from the real needs of teachers of Inclusive Education, which makes it difficult for students to engage in teaching practice in the future, and hence their confidence is undermined.

At the same time, teachers in Inclusive Education still face multiple pressures from their work, professional, interpersonal, student, and role. Li Xiu pointed out that at present, the pressure of teachers of Inclusive Education in elementary school is generally high, with the pressure from the workload is the largest, and the pressure of professional skills is the smallest [11]. Xie Zhengli and others used the questionnaire survey method and found that the greater the occupational pressure of Inclusive Education teachers, the more serious the burnout. The development of Inclusive Education has led to more and more children with special needs attending ordinary schools, and teach-

ers of Inclusive Education need to invest more time and energy than ordinary teachers; however, it is difficult for their rewards to be proportional to their work inputs [12]. Shi Maolin, on the other hand, analyzed the work pressure of teachers of Inclusive Education in elementary school, and concluded that the heavy workload, the lack of the concept of Inclusive Education, as well as the internal psychological and role conflict divisions were the main causes of their high work pressure [13]. However, some scholars have also cut from the perspective of the theory of counter-resilience, arguing that appropriate work stress has a role to play in the enhancement of teachers' literacy in Inclusive Education [14].

3.2.2 Research on students

The student, as the policy target of the Inclusive Education policy, is the subject of Inclusive Education. 2021 The Action Plan for Enhancing the Development of Special Education in the 14th Five-Year Plan, jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and seven other departments, explicitly proposed strengthening the integration of general education and special education, and exploring a model of Inclusive Education that is adapted to the joint growth of children with disabilities and ordinary children. For students in Inclusive Education, Li Huan and others used a meta-analysis to point out that at present, ordinary students have a positive attitude towards Inclusive Education for special students in general, however, the way attitudes are tested also influences ordinary students' attitudes towards Inclusive Education, and there are still negative implicit attitudes of ordinary students towards students with disabilities [15]. Regarding the attitudes and interpersonal interactions of regular students toward students with disabilities, Wang Jiaojiao and others used peer nomination tests and social network analysis to study the peer relationships between children with intellectual disabilities and regular children, and found that students with intellectual disabilities learning in regular class did not have a high level of acceptance of their peers in general, and found it difficult to establish good friendships with regular students [16]. Similarly, Wang Tiantian and others used the grounded theory approach of the qualitative research paradigm to study college students with disabilities in the context of Inclusive Education, and found that the knock-on effects of the lack of physical capital, such as segregation of living spaces, communication barriers, and physical limitations led to a lack of opportunities to build friendships with regular students [17]. Song Shanshan also pointed out that bullying is more prevalent among students with autism in the context of Inclusive Education [18]. Concerning social support for students with disabilities, some scholars have summarized a social support

system model that includes four dimensions, namely, the content of support, the nature of support, the main body of support, and the support environment, encouraging researchers to localize and flexibly apply the theory of social support, and to give full play to the roles of the State administration and the legislature in supporting Inclusive Education [19]. Chen Qingyi used qualitative interviews to track the growth experiences of hearing-impaired college students, pointing out that good social support can help hearing-impaired students realize self-reconstruction and complete the process of regulating their efforts from getting rid of definition to self-reconstruction [20]. Parents and families are the core and key to Inclusive Education. Wang Zhiyun pointed out that parents of children with special needs still have a lot of knowledge about the education of children with special needs that needs to be improved [21]. Meanwhile, Liu Xiaohong and Deng Yuchao, through the questionnaire method, found that parents showed lower acceptance of Inclusive Education when multiple choices were made, indicating that deep down in their hearts, parents still worried that kindergartens were unable to take care of their special young children [22]. Dai Jianyu and Ge Xinbin pointed out that the evaluation of parents of students with special needs is an indispensable reference for the quality improvement of Inclusive Education, and their satisfaction is an important indicator for evaluating the quality of Inclusive Education services [23]. Xu Yun and Zhu Minrui also pointed out that the lack of close cooperation between schools and parents, especially the attitudes of parents of ordinary children and teachers of regular schools towards Inclusive Education, have brought great challenges to the real Inclusive Education [24]. Yang Ru and Cheng Li researched the home-school interaction mode of students with special needs based on the theory of interaction ritual chain, and pointed out that the formation of a common focus between home and school is the key prerequisite for good interaction [25].

4. Discussion

4.1 The Main Contributions of Existing Research

In addition to tracing the evolution and development of special education policies, existing literature primarily analyzes the special education policies for children with disabilities in the context of China's inclusive education from three aspects: students with disabilities, special education teachers, and home-school interaction. Regarding students with disabilities, existing literature has found that around 30% of school-age children with disabilities are still not enrolled in school, and the method of inclusive education

in regular classes still has many problems. Moreover, the concept of inclusive education in society has not yet been well established. Existing literature also analyzes the hierarchical structure of the social support system from multiple aspects, summarizes a social support system model and applies it to specific analyses of children with disabilities, such as children with autism. Regarding teachers, existing literature examines their understanding and implementation of inclusive education and explores the heterogeneous hierarchical pressures they face in practice and their institutional causes. Regarding home-school interaction, existing literature has conducted certain qualitative studies.

4.2 The Limitations of Existing Research

In the study of policy evolution, existing research mainly focuses on the historical systematization of policy changes and macro analysis, but there is a lack of research on local differentiated practices in the policy implementation process and the evaluation of policy implementation effects. At the same time, there is also a lack of in-depth exploration of the game and interaction of stakeholders behind policy changes (such as local governments, schools, teachers, and parents). In the research on teachers, existing studies are insufficient in exploring the professional development paths of inclusive education teachers, such as how to optimize pre-service training (normal university curriculum settings) and in-service training (school-based research and government training programs). Moreover, there is a lack of systematic research on the collaboration models between resource teachers and regular teachers, for example, how interdisciplinary teams can effectively support students in inclusive classes. In the research on students, existing studies mainly focus on the social integration of students with disabilities, but there is a lack of research on the inclusive education experience of regular students (such as peer assistance and anti-prejudice education). At the same time, there is a lack of long-term tracking research on the academic achievements of students with disabilities, such as the impact of inclusive education on their further education and employment. There is also insufficient research on the inclusive education needs of students with specific disabilities, such as high-functioning autism and ADHD. At the family level, existing research lacks studies on the establishment of home-school communication platforms and empirical research on the support systems for families of students with disabilities, such as how social workers and community resources can be involved.

5. Conclusion

The policy system for special education in China has achieved remarkable results in safeguarding the right to education of students with disabilities. Since the implementation of relevant policies, from improving top-level design to tilting resources at the grassroots level, and from comprehensively promoting inclusive education to building a professional support system, a special education service network has been gradually formed. It covers all school stages from preschool education, compulsory education, vocational education, to higher education, and all types, including visual, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Driven by policies, the enrollment rate of students with disabilities has steadily increased, and educational equity and social inclusiveness have been continuously enhanced.

In the future, it is necessary to further strengthen the dynamic adjustment and precise implementation of policies, increase financial investment, improve the long-term mechanism for teacher training, and promote the deep empowerment of special education by technologies such as artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, deepen the collaborative education mechanism among families, schools, and society, and meet the differentiated needs of students with disabilities with more refined and personalized services. This will effectively promote the high-quality development of special education and achieve the core goals of educational equity and inclusive development.

The policy system for special education in China has achieved remarkable effect in safeguarding the right to education of students with disabilities. After the implementation of relevant policies, a special education service network covering all school stages from preschool to higher education and all types of disabled groups has been established. Driven by policies, the enrollment rate of students with disabilities has steadily increased, and educational equity and social inclusiveness have been enhanced.

In the future, it is necessary to deepen the dynamic adjustment and precise implementation of policies, strengthen financial investment and the long-term mechanism for teacher training, empower special education with artificial intelligence; improve the collaborative education system among families, schools, and society, and use refined and personalized services to promote the high-quality development of special education and achieve the goals of educational equity and inclusive development.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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