

Present Situation and Improvement Strategies of Inclusive Early Childhood Education Teachers in China

Yicheng Zhang¹

¹ University of Edinburgh

Correspondence: Yicheng Zhang, University of Edinburgh.

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Abstract

Although there are few studies on inclusive early childhood education in China, it has become an increasingly important part of education in recent years. Therefore, the construction of excellent preschool integrated teachers has become very urgent and essential. In China, the government pays sufficient attention to the training of preschool integrated teachers. At the present stage, the teachers have been basically established, but we still face some problems, such as the lack of professional inclusive early childhood education teachers, the insufficient treatment and protection of teachers and so on. In this regard, this essay also puts forward several improvement strategies.

Keywords: inclusive early childhood education, preschool teachers, present situation, improvement strategies

1. Background

The concept of inclusive education was introduced in 1984 and formalised in Spain's Salamanca Declaration and Programme of Action for Education for Special Needs in 1994. In the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) called on China and many other countries around the world to carry out inclusive education. China's first high-profile access to ordinary classrooms for children with disabilities in mainstream schools was in the 1980s (Deng and Zhu, 2007), which precedes UNESCO's call. Specifically, our country's initial inclusive education was to promote inclusiveness measures in rural and remote areas. There, due to limited financial resources and expertise, as well as difficult transportation conditions, ordinary classrooms are often the only option to provide some education for children with disabilities. It is worth mentioning that anecdotes from Chinese scholars and practitioners also show that in individual cases, the practice of children with disabilities entering mainstream schools lasts much longer (Xu, 2012). This shows that our country has always attached great importance to the implementation of inclusive education.

Early childhood education is crucial for all children, especially those with special needs. Because this age is an important period for the rapid development of brain and intellectual, physical, emotional and behavioural processes (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020). With the development of special education in China, inclusive early childhood education has attracted more and more researchers' attention (Zhang, Liu & Lin, 2019). China's inclusive education provides education for students with special educational needs and supports the admission of the majority of students with special educational needs in general schools (Malinen, 2013). The government has also provided specific guidelines for the implementation of the inclusive education strategy. A specific goal of this influential document is to have at least one special education school per prefecture-level city or county with a population of more than 300,000 by 2020. According to Liu and Jiang (2008), the number of children with disabilities attending school is growing so fast that it would be very expensive to expand the network of special education schools at the same rate, and accepting children with disabilities to ordinary classrooms is considered more cost-effective. Therefore, it is urgent to implement inclusive education.

However, Yadav et al. (2015) pointed out that it is very difficult to create an inclusive education system that promotes professionalism, including professional education and competent teachers. Therefore, it is difficult to accommodate children with special needs physically and socially. In other words, it is a big challenge to well implement inclusive education.

2. What Is Inclusive Early Childhood Education?

First of all, different scholars around the world have different definitions of the concept of inclusive. Biamba (2016) believes that inclusive is a term used to describe the ideology that every child, to the greatest extent, should be educated in the school and classroom where he or she should have attended. In other words, inclusive means that the differences between children should be accepted and respected. Agbenyega and Klibthong (2014) proposed that inclusive early childhood education (IECE) refers to an early learning project for children with disabilities or without disabilities from birth to the age of 8. Zabeli and Majlinda (2020) agree that early childhood inclusive education refers to the inclusion of all children in the classroom or group, regardless of race, language, belief, culture, economic status or other physical and psychological disorders. In China, preschool integration education means that preschool children aged 0 to 6 with special needs can truly receive care and education in preschool institutions together with other normal development companions (Mao, 2016). Based on the above, inclusive early childhood education is a difference between receiving each child. Special children should receive non-discriminatory education in kindergartens together with normal children, but schools and teachers can teach according to their aptitude to promote the comprehensive and healthy growth of special children.

3. The Role of Teachers in IECE

Globally, the concept of education related to children with special needs has changed in recent decades (Biamba, 2016). Therefore, policymakers, educators and parents around the world are making serious efforts to promote inclusive education practises (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). According to Zhao and Li (2019), the role of inclusive education teachers is diverse and complex. Inclusive education teachers are developed in the process of implementing the concept of inclusive education, which is an important part of the support and guarantee system established for children with special needs enrollment in ordinary schools. Through its help, special needs students receive targeted guidance and improve the quality of inclusive education, ultimately realising the goal of promoting the healthy physical and mental development of special students. Its role can be a teacher, counsellor, teaching planner, partner, and the key to the success or failure of the resource teacher program. IECE teachers are teachers with special characteristics, which are different from ordinary preschool teachers. They play an important role in inclusive education. As Liu (2013) elaborates, whether IECE can be carried out effectively is closely related to preschool workers.

4. The Present Situation of IECE Teachers in China

Generally, most of the current IECE teachers in our country have only learned one of the preschool education major or special education majors. Liu (2013) agrees that preschool educators have little access to special education-related knowledge before employment, and there is a lack of professional training due to few institutions for special education after employment. Another point is that IECE teachers in professional institutions, such as children's rehabilitation institutions and children's welfare homes, most of them have professional knowledge in medicine or health care and rehabilitation, but lack professional training in children's preschool education. Such a situation will make preschool-integrated education to carry out a certain difficulty.

Nevertheless, at this stage, China's IECE and teacher team building have achieved certain results, mainly in the following two aspects:

Firstly, the Chinese government, relevant education departments and schools attach great importance to and pay attention to the development of preschool-integrated education. As Hu et al. (2011) state, the Chinese government's national policy on the inclusion of preschool education is taking shape to promote the well-being of all children, especially children with disabilities in the natural environment, such as formal kindergartens or families. In 2017, the Ministry of Education issued the Second Special Education Promotion Program, which proposed to comprehensively promote inclusive education, facilitate the preschool enrolment of disabled children, and provide more basic services such as functional evaluation, intervention and rehabilitation equipment for eligible preschool-disabled children. Some local governments have also issued documents to improve the treatment of teachers in special education and increase the salary and welfare benefits of teachers engaged in special education and inclusive education by about 15%.

Secondly, with the development of special education, China's preschool integrated education system and teachers have been basically established. At present, preschool special children in China are mainly placed in three environments, and a county-city-provincial-central system has been basically formed throughout the country, and the education system and teachers have been basically established. One is an institution that

specialises in preschool special children, such as rehabilitation centres for disabled children, preschool classes in special education schools, etc.; the other is early childhood education institutions that mainly admit special children, and also admit ordinary children, such as schools for deaf and mute children; the other is an early childhood education institution that mainly admits ordinary children, with special children's classes. For example, in the past few years, China has carried out several studies in developed cities on how to integrate children with disabilities into regular kindergartens. The results show that these developed cities can accommodate children with disabilities, and inclusive education has been widely popularised in the country.

Although the Chinese government has raised its level of awareness of the importance of providing special education services for early childhood through inclusive education, there is still a long way to go. In China, preschool integration education also faces the following challenges and problems.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the strength of preschool-integrated teachers is weak, there is a lack of systematic training, and the level of specialisation is generally low. On the one hand, China's current preschool education major. Only a few colleges and universities have added a special education content with one credit, and post-service training on preschool integration education is also rare, so the lack of self-confidence of front-line teachers is inevitable (Zhou, 2006). This is consistent with the view of Hu (2010) that most of the kindergarten curriculum do not take into account the inclusion of children with disabilities in urban or rural areas of China, mainly due to the lack of resources to provide services and trained personnel. Moreover, even in developed cities, Yang, Zhang and Liu (2009) survey on the professional development of preschool special teachers in Shanghai shows that the ratio of preschool special teachers and students is about 1:5.8, which is far from meeting the requirements of children with special educational needs. Yang (2019) also explained that many preschool teachers engaged in preschool integration education have their own lack of professionalism and need to be strengthened in terms of special skills and special services. According to statistical data, many preschool teachers engaged in preschool-integrated teaching are from preschool education majors, so they only learn professional knowledge for ordinary teaching, which is difficult to meet the needs of special young children. Hu (2010) During the visit to kindergarten, it was found that children with disabilities were often excluded from school due to a serious lack of specially trained early childhood education teachers, general education teachers, and resources available for the recruitment, training and retention of these professionals. On the other hand, in China, the academic qualifications of preschool teachers are low compared with other teachers. Generally speaking, college or undergraduate graduation is the threshold for preschool teachers. And there is a serious imbalance between men and women, which will cause some difficulties in implementing further inclusive education.

Secondly, preschool integration teachers have difficulties in practical operation. Wang (2009) stressed that although inclusiveness is conducive to the development of students' and teachers' abilities and skills, the implementation of inclusion projects is likely to put teachers under considerable pressure from the required environmental reorganisation. Teachers face constant difficulties (Dyson, 2001). This dilemma includes rhythm, learning style, seating arrangement and personal attention. For some teachers, it is difficult to meet various needs in one class. Preschool-integrated education requires cooperation between specialised personnel and teachers. Professional diagnosis and assessment of children with special needs is an important part of the effective implementation of preschool integration education (Liu, 2013). In China, there is an extreme shortage of professional personnel, speech therapists, physiotherapists, etc. This will bring great challenges to preschool teachers. Once teachers do not systematically learn how to diagnose and treat, they will burden special children and themselves, and may even have problems.

Thirdly, the treatment and protection of teachers are insufficient. The basic income of preschool teachers does not match their pay and is also at a low level compared with other teachers. The basic income of preschool teachers does not match other teachers. If the basic security of preschool teachers is not enough, let alone more teachers can learn inclusive education. In China, many kindergarten teachers change jobs frequently, which is largely due to low wages.

Fourthly, there are still regional differences in preschool-integrated education. Although preschool integration education is basically popularised in China, it is more used in developed cities, and there may still be shortcomings in some backward areas. With the policy support of the central government, local governments in China also need to formulate operational policies and procedures according to the needs of the local environment in order to effectively implement inclusive services (Hu & et al., 2011).

5. How to Strengthen the Construction of IECE Teachers?

Strengthening the construction of teachers has become a key issue in the development of IECE in China.

First, the state should accelerate the construction of legislation and system, and legally integrate preschool integration education into the preschool education system. From the perspective of the formulation of laws, although China has involved the relevant content of special education in the legal systems such as the Teachers

Law, the Regulations on the Education of the Disabled, the Compulsory Education Law, on the whole, the authority and professionalism of these laws and regulations are not strong, and the relevant laws and regulations lack operability, especially the lack of special education laws (Liu, 2013). For instance, the British government introduced a special education implementation charter in 2001. Once children are identified as having special education needs, educators should intervene early. China can absorb foreign experience and establish a comprehensive legal system. In addition, because at this stage in China, there are very few universities specialising in preschool-integrated education, and the inclusion of special children in general preschool education has not been legally clear, so it is best to include it in national legislation and education development plans and guarantee them institutionally.

Then, to establish a favorable atmosphere in which schools, parents, professional institutions and the whole society understand and support inclusive education. In China, because few people clearly understand the concept of IECE and the care and education of children with special preschool education needs have not received enough attention, some teachers and parents have cognitive misunderstandings on this issue (Zhou, 2006). This means that it is very important to change teachers themselves and parents' cognition of preschool integration education. Preschool teachers themselves should constantly improve. According to Yang (2019), when many preschool teachers first come into contact with preschool integration teaching, they will also have disconfidence due to incomplete professional matching and other reasons. Therefore, enhancing the sense of professional identity is an important measure for preschool teachers to improve themselves. Additionally, strengthening home cooperation, giving full play to the leading role of kindergartens and teachers, and enlisting the support and participation of the community and parents are also important parts of promoting the development of preschool-integrated education.

Besides, strengthen the teacher education and training of IECE. Liu (2013) pointed out that preschool education majors in normal colleges should carry out courses related to special education. Institutions should also add content about preschool-integrated education to pre-vocational education, which is conducive to improving the professionalisation of teachers. First, preschool education majors in normal colleges and universities should provide special education-related courses to systematically train preschool teachers, so that they can master the corresponding knowledge and skills and improve their ability to integrate education. Second, relevant preschool education institutions should provide in-service teachers with opportunities to train them in relevant knowledge and skills in special education majors. Third, professionals from some rehabilitation institutions can regularly go to kindergartens to provide teaching guidance and training to early childhood workers to help solve various practical problems.

Finally, the state should also protect the rights and interests of preschool teachers and establish a guarantee system for teachers. For example, only by constantly improving the salary and treatment of preschool teachers and providing a good working atmosphere, attracting more outstanding talents (including men) to join the teaching team, unblocking the room for teachers to grow and promote, and achieving material and spiritual simultaneous satisfaction, so that more kindergarten teachers can resist from society and parents. And the huge spiritual pressure brought by myself promotes the benign development of IECE. Establishing a more competitive salary system for teachers engaged in IECE than ordinary preschool teachers will attract more outstanding talents to join the ranks of IECE teachers.

6. Conclusion

In short, inclusive education is considered important for children's early development and education. It has certain advantages in China's development, but there are still certain challenges at this stage, such as the lack of professional IECE teachers. Therefore, the government and relevant departments not only need to pay attention to the position of teachers in preschool integration education, but also implement it to cultivate more and more inclusive preschool integrated teachers who are willing to help special young children. For example, strengthen pre-service and post-service training, and set up integration majors, etc. In addition, as educators, we should not ignore that any preschool child, especially special children, should give more care, and we need to learn actively and use professional skills to help children. Inclusive education is a great cause with extraordinary significance, full of hope and great potential. It is worth exploring, perfecting and dedicating to every educator.

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