The Development and Challenge of Early Childhood Inclusion in China

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Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) suggests that young children with disabilities should be integrated into the normal child population, so that they can enjoy inclusive education. This study analyzed 89 papers on preschool inclusive education in China from 2012 to 2021 collected in China national knowledge infrastructure (CNKI), and found that the current research mainly focuses on the importance of preschool inclusive education, current situation and strategies, teachers' literacy and attitudes. In the future, research on preschool inclusive education in China will encounter challenges in terms of policies, Classroom Practice and Qualified Teachers, Cultural Understanding of Children with Disabilities, resources.

Keywords: Preschool inclusive education; Special education; China

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a global trend that carries the idea of providing children regardless of their ability, gender, ethnic or cultural origin-with equal resources, participation, and learning opportunities (Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Jelas, 2000). Inclusion is considered an international phenomenon; it becomes essential to examine the differences in its meaning across different educational systems and how it is understood and practiced within a particular historical, social and cultural context.

Inclusive education emphasizes that each child be an equally valued member of the school culture involving presence, participation, acceptance, and achievement (Eldar et al., 2010). It affects all children’s right to participate actively in a general education setting and be valued as members of that education community (Carrington, 2007). Many early care and education programs worldwide share the value that children with disabilities should participate in natural environments alongside their peers without disabilities (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Dessemontet et al., 2012; Odom et al., 2004).

Young children with disabilities have shown positive developmental and quality-of-life outcomes when they have full access to inclusive preschool settings (Odom et al., 2004). Many of them have gained social engagement, social acceptance (Odom et al., 2004, and
friendships in a general preschool setting. Meanwhile, research that conducted comparisons between the overall quality of inclusive and non-inclusive programs revealed that inclusive preschools tended to have a higher score on overall quality (Buysse et al. 1999; Dessemontet et al., 2012; Hestenes et al., 2008), which indicates that the quality of a preschool program is likely to be increased for all children as a result of promoting inclusion services.

Despite legal and moral imperatives, there are different interpretations and transformations of national policies in practice based on each country’s specific sociopolitical context, cultural attitudes, and belief systems about disability, which leads to very different developmental stages of inclusive education in the international context (Pijl et al., 1997). Kozleski et al. (2010) suggested that there are generally two groups of countries that took part in the inclusion movement while facing different challenges and issues. Specifically, some countries such as Canada, the United States, and Sweden continue to lead early childhood inclusion development (Frankel, 2004; O’Brien, 2007). Meanwhile, in many Asian, African, South American countries, the movement toward inclusive education is gradually occurring (Forlin, 2010; Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010).

Within the Asian countries or cities that join in the inclusion movement, Singapore (Yeo, et al., 2011) have gradually started to explore the implementation of early childhood inclusion. Specifically, governmental policy-makers, education professionals, and practitioners show increasing interest in establishing inclusive preschools where children with various disabilities can access a general kindergarten (Hu & Li, 2012). As its international political and economic power increases, the Chinese government joined the worldwide endeavor to improve the implementation of inclusion on the preschool level, aiming at improving the quality of current inclusive services by granting more children with disabilities equal educational opportunities for quality ECE (early childhood education) programs (Hu & Szente, 2010; Hu & Roberts, 2011).

2. Literature review

2.1 Inclusive Education in China

Among the research studies conducted in China focusing on examining inclusive education, the practice of LRC (children with disabilities learning in the regular classroom) becomes the center of discussion, gradually being conceptualized as a Chinese policy and practice of inclusive education. Most of the previous research studies fail to provide a rationale for why focusing only on the education of disabled children in general preschool settings while pursuing an understanding of early inclusive education in China (Hu & Szente, 2010; Hu et al., 2016).

In a research project exploring disabled children’s participation and learning in public primary and secondary schools in China, Wang (2016) gave adequate rationales for focusing on children with disabilities while exploring inclusion in the Chinese school context. To start with, research that targets a particular group of children tend to face the potential challenge of being criticized for generating categorical thinking about diversity and beliefs and practice that lead to exclusion. Thus, in recent years, more and more research studies, as Norwich (2013) found out, to create more distance from the specific circumstances of disability and
difficulties, tend to emphasize the perception of ‘all’ while talking about inclusive education. Nevertheless, like what Miles and Singal (2010) addressed in their research, the emphasis on ‘all’ could potentially sideline the interests of disabled children since other issues, such as those concerned with ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic class interests, could draw more attention (Tan, 2014). Thus, Wang (2016) first argued that inclusive education needs to address both ‘all’ and ‘some’ to contribute to all children's learning and participation while not overlooking the marginalization and exclusion facing vulnerable groups. Moreover, by agreeing with Allan (2010), Wang further explained that Chinese children with disabilities are the only group of children whose exclusion from traditional schools is still legitimized and rationales to do so still dominate, it is thus essential to involve them while conceptualizing inclusive education in the Chinese context. In the end, Wang (2016) concluded her argument by stating that examining the inclusion process of disabled children will contribute no less to a complete knowledge of inclusion in China and demonstrate the urgency to address issues this group is facing.

2.2 Education of Children with Disabilities in China

Along with the ‘Reform and Open Door’ policy, part of the Chinese government’s attention also shifted to the education and the overall well-being of children with disabilities. As early as the 1980s, long before any implementation of legislation and laws to advocate for the development of inclusion in China, the practice of including children with disabilities in nearby general schools was experimented in rural areas due to the lack of transportation that prevented the students from attending special schools located mostly in the city or the town center (Yang & Wang, 1994). This initiative was called ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (LRC or ‘Suibanjaju’d in Chinese), as a government policy of accepting children with disabilities in mainstream classes. In 1988 at the first ‘International Work-Conference on Special Education,’ the concept of LRC was first introduced, together with the call for special classes attached to public schools. Since then, the ‘China National Institute of Educational Research Special Education Center’ has led several national pilot projects to include children with disabilities in regular classes. The first systematic endeavor of inclusion started from the mountainous areas rather than in cities, a choice made by the government due to the lack of resources for children with SEN2 in mountainous areas. It was described as ‘this strategy does not necessarily reflect allegiance to the concept of the mainstream, rather it more accurately reflects a shortage of personnel, limited fiscal resources, and facilities in addition to geographical considerations’ (Deng & Manset, 2000).

In the 1990s, China responded to the worldwide movement to improve the implementation of inclusion more systematically by initiating and implementing its laws and legislation. Specifically, while UNESCO was advocating the implementation of inclusive education, China responded by implementing its first national law, ‘the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Disabled Persons Act’ (National People’s Congress, 1991), which dedicated itself to ensuring the fundamental rights of people with disabilities. Furthermore, in 1994, in responding to ‘Salamanca statement’ initiated from the UNESCO ‘World Conference on Special Needs Education,’ ‘the Educational Guidelines for People with Disabilities’ was carried out by the National Education Committee of the People’s Republic of China, which further emphasized the importance of inclusive education and advocated for
its implementation on the national level. Moreover, the ‘Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law’ implemented in 1986 further addressed the educational needs of children with disabilities by stating that ‘all children who have reached the age of six…regardless of sex, ethnic group or race’ have access to public schools (The National People’s Congress 1986). Even though the word ‘inclusion’ was not directly addressed in this legislation, it advocated schools try to accept children with various learning needs (Wang et al., 1993).

Despite the influence that the western ideology and perceptions of special education have cast on the foundation and development of special education and later inclusive education in China (Deng et al., 2001), the Chinese government developed inclusion based on its political, economic, and cultural backgrounds (Deng & Su, 2012). Specifically, on the one hand, they have maintained a unique educational system as the leading academic format for children with profound special education needs. On the other hand, the unique education system also serves as the primary resource for supporting the development of inclusive education in public schools. It is a development model that both emphasizes the importance of special education and inclusive education, as is often referred to as ‘special education schools as the backbone, learning in the regular classroom as the main body in several research studies (CPG, 2011; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Guo, 2007). The Chinese government aimed to build more special schools and set a target that by 2020 every town with more than 300,000 residents should have at least one particular education school (CPG, 2011).

Children with disabilities learning in regular classrooms (LRC) is the primary inclusion format in the Chinese school system. It officially offers access to public schooling for children with the following three categories of disabilities: children with intellectual disability, children with a visual disability, and children with hearing impairments in elementary or secondary schools. Those children take up the most significant percentage of the student population with disabilities in China, and their education constitutes the weakest part of the Chinese compulsory education system (Gu, 1993; Xu & Shi, 1990). In 2016, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, there were in total 2080 special schools, and 491,700 children with disabilities were enrolled: specifically, 36,100 children with visual disability; 90,000 children with hearing disabilities; and the rest 260,500 children with intellectual disabilities, and 105,100 for children with other various disabilities. At the same time, traditional schools provided education to 270,800 children with disabilities, including via special classes in regular schools. What’s more, in recent years, due to the persistent argument and persuasion of many parents and increasing social awareness of autism, children with autism spectrum disorders have also been, in some big cities, including in the general kindergartens and primary schools (Huang, Jia & Wheeler, 2013). Also, some economically and culturally developed cities like Beijing and Shanghai have initiated policies to encourage parents to send their children with disabilities for EI (early intervention) and related services by offering partial reimbursement. The maximum amount available for the rebate per family is 500 yuan (65 euros) monthly.

Despite China’s progress for the past 30 years since the implementation of LRC, several children with other types of disabilities are excluded from the public school system (Deng & Manset, 2000), let alone children in rural areas (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). For example, children with severe intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities have not been given
access to public schools mainly because school resources such as qualified teachers’ professional support still are lacking (Deng, 2003). Moreover, while examining from the national level, many children are deprived of equal access to public schools due to the striking regional differences for every aspect in Chinese schools. Specifically, the developmental gap between western and eastern China and the internal differences within a region or a city lead to relatively differentiated levels of special education and LRC. The public services (reimbursement provided to families with children with disabilities) are only limited to city areas (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007; Li, 2007).

Even for children already enrolled in regular schools, discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion against them still exist. As Hu et al. (2016) indicated, most children with disabilities only physically presented themselves in the general classroom, and rare participation and learning occurred. What’s more, in her dissertation study (Wang, 2016), where the researcher focused on the involvement and education of children with disabilities in the ‘pilot inclusive schools’ in Shanghai, she found out that only with appropriate methods applied by the teachers and balanced power relations between teachers and the students, children with disabilities were able to voice their views on schooling. In fact, for most of the time, many teachers showed a lack of proper methods to include students with SEN. What’s worse, it also revealed that many of the students with SEN were not recruited in the whole evaluation system because their performances were automatically ignored. Some students with SEN did not attend the classes regularly. Some did not even show up in the ranks.

3. Methodology

The present study aims to identify the main issues and trends in early child education of inclusion published in the “China national knowledge infrastructure(CNKI)”during the period 2012–2021. In order to ensure the completeness of the literature search, this paper used "early child", "inclusive education" and "LRC" as search terms respectively. By eliminating duplicate literature and ineffective and invalid literature, a total of 89 literature articles were reviewed, mainly focusing on the years 2012-2021, with the date of review is 5 May 2022. After analysis, the current situation and future development trend of research on preschool integrated education in China in the past ten years were understood.

4. Themes and findings

4.1 Literature publication trend graph and analysis

The annual publication situation of 89 valid literature articles was analyzed, and the detailed data distribution of each year is shown in Figure 1. In 2012, the report of the 18th National Congress proposed "supporting special education", and in 2017, the 19th National Congress proposed "running good special education", and in 2017, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance in 2017, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance explicitly requested "support for ordinary kindergartens to accept children with disabilities". This shows the increasing importance attached to preschool inclusive education in China.
4.2 Analysis of keywords

Keywords are a distillation of the central idea of a document, a high level summary of the content of the article, the number is usually between 3 and 8, the repeated occurrence of key words that appear several times usually represent the hot spots in the research field. By analysing the key words, we can effectively focus on the hot areas, evolutionary trends and cutting-edge issues of preschool integrated education research in China. After analysis, the high-frequency keywords in all the literature include: inclusive education, preschool inclusive education, preschool education, special children, special education. By further analysis, it was found that the research themes of preschool inclusive education were mainly focused on the following areas.

4.3 Analysis of research themes

4.3.1 The Importance of Developing Preschool Inclusive Education

As a relatively new field, scholars in China have conducted preliminary exploration of preschool inclusive education mainly from the perspective of the need to develop preschool inclusive education in China. The majority of studies have concluded that preschool integrated education is necessary and that it is mutually beneficial to both groups of children as it places special children and ordinary children together in activities. The inclusion of children with special needs in a normal environment promotes the development of children with special needs and helps them to adapt to society as early as possible.(Wang, 2018) On the other hand, it can also contribute to the development of ordinary children, who, in the process of spending time with special children, can promote their understanding of them and can experience the joy of helping them. This is a win-win situation for all involved, as it contributes to the development of good character. (Li, 2017)
4.3.2. The current situation and strategies of preschool inclusive education

In the process of developing preschool inclusive education, the current situation has received the attention of researchers. The current situation of preschool integrated education is not optimistic. On the one hand, most kindergartens do not accept inclusive education, believing that admitting children with special needs will bring many problems. The researcher found that the number of kindergartens accepting children with special needs is low, and the rate of children with special needs attending kindergartens is low (Chen, Ren, Zhang, 2018). On the other hand, although some kindergartens do implement inclusive education, they are not able to meet the needs of children with special needs due to various constraints and the survival of children with special needs in ordinary kindergartens is not satisfactory (Yu, 2018).

After recognizing the current situation of preschool inclusive education, researchers have put forward corresponding solutions based on the current situation, mainly divided into two categories: one is from a macro perspective, the government should strengthen funding; provide institutional protection; and train appropriate talents to help kindergartens build a high-quality teacher team (Kong, 2018; Chen, 2018). The other is from a micro perspective, which suggests that kindergarten curricula should be adapted to the actual situation of children and focus on the practicality of the curriculum (Yu, Wang, 2006).

4.3.3 Research on teacher literacy in inclusive education

Researchers have focused their studies on the professional literacy of preschool teachers, including professional development and professional literacy of preschool teachers. However, through the survey, it was found that current early childhood teachers lack inclusive education-related literacy and are less than ideal in terms of overall level and attitude and knowledge (Wu, 2017). This lack of literacy mainly includes the lack of knowledge of special education and the lack of skills of early childhood teachers. The lack of knowledge and skills in special education (Cui, 2016).

4.3.4. Research on societal attitudes

The researcher approached various groups to explore their attitudes towards preschool inclusive education and found that the community's attitudes towards preschool inclusive education were not positive. Early childhood teachers are less accepting of children with special needs, with negative attitudes and insufficient relevant expertise (Zhao, Xu, 2018). Parents' acceptance of preschool inclusive education is not very positive (Liu, Deng, 2018; Deng, 2018). Preschool children's acceptance of children with special needs is also low, but the acceptance of peers with disabilities by preschool children in inclusive classes is significantly higher than that of children in regular classes by the end of the year, suggesting that preschool inclusive education has a facilitating effect on regular children's peer inclusion (Xing, 2018).

5. Recommendations
The above analysis, combined with the current situation of the development of preschool inclusive education in China, suggests that the implementation of early childhood inclusive education in China will encounter several challenges in the following areas.

5.1 Policy

Currently, the Chinese government is eager to extend such inclusive education into the preschools (National People’s Congress 2001, 2006). Both educational laws and national plans indicate that public preschool inclusion should be the primary avenue for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, while encouraging kindergartens to accept and educate children with SEN, they do not claim it necessary. Today, very few government-run, community-based preschools are willing to consider enrolling children with disabilities. Any preschool in China can reject children with disabilities, citing reasons irrespective of the legal recommendation for inclusive practices (Wang & Shen, 2009). Moreover, some researchers also indicated that general ambiguity in related legislation is another reason for the lack of related educational services for children with disabilities (McCabe, 2002). In addition, the necessary legislation and other governmental plans also fail to provide specific guidelines for concrete implementations for kindergartens and teachers, implementing preschool inclusion less possible (National Education Committee of the People’s Republic of China 1994).

5.2 Classroom Practice and Qualified Teachers

The difficulty of educating children with SEN has been increased because of the large-class size predominant in preschool settings: specifically, the ratio of teacher and children is usually 15–20:1. Usually, one teacher has to be responsible for more students in rural areas than city areas. Teachers’ primary concerns are with most students, not individually catering for each child’s specific needs, which makes it difficult for inclusion to occur (Chen, 1996). Moreover, social collectivism has served as the cornerstone for schools, and teachers are not trained or expected to teach children based on their individual needs (Deng et al., 2001). Deng and Harris (2008) describe the standard practice in Chinese classrooms as ‘curriculum, instructional methods, and academic standards are identical for all students. Thus, accepting children with disabilities presents a big challenge for teachers and schools since ‘the traditional uniformity in viewing students’ ability and rigidity of using a whole class lecturing mode for all students was no longer valid for the newcomers with special needs. Thus, even though some methods were introduced to Chinese teachers and classrooms for accommodating children’s various needs, general incompetence to individualized or differentiated education is still identified among Chinese teachers (Yu et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, there is still no national standard qualification for special and inclusive education (Yu et al., 2011). Both pre-service and in-service teachers, in general, lack a proper understanding of inclusion. From various research studies, teachers generally expressed the concern of lacking the basic knowledge of children with SEN (Li, 2007; Zhou, 2006). The teachers’ training system usually requires four years of training (a college degree program) for primary and the above schools. For kindergarten teachers, it usually takes three years to finish.
While examining the contents and formats of those courses offered among the degree-seeking programs, few focus on providing students’ knowledge of special education, let alone inclusive education (Law, 2011). Even though a few universities in China prepare teachers to work with children with special needs, almost no programs specialize in early childhood inclusive education (Liu & Zeng, 2007). Meanwhile, many in-service training programs are primarily short-termed or take place on weekends when the teachers are tired after the whole week's work (Deng et al., 2001).

5.3 Cultural Understanding of Children with Disabilities
Chinese culture influences people by Confucius’ philosophy, which values collectivism and accepts one’s social role in a hierarchical society (Deng et al. 2001). For centuries, people with disabilities have always been perceived as having a lower social status of the hierarchic feudal pyramid, and social stigma toward people with disabilities still widely exists (Lee, 1995). In China, their voices are still far less heard than the voices of others (Lee & Regan, 2010; Pearson et al., 2002). A sympathetic social attitude towards children with a disability had been carefully nurtured under the dominant Confucian philosophy, which advocated harmonious order and humaneness in social relations (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Yu et al., 2011). The community’s shared responsibility is to take care of them (Shen et al., 2008). Specifically, in his study (Fengyan, 2004), the researcher illustrates the moral implications of the Confucian tradition by showing how Confucian ideas of human nature, when applied to moral education in educational settings, tend to focus on the practice of virtue or goodness. This cultural belief is shared in some other Asian cultures and has been perceived as an obstacle to developing inclusive education (Deng & Harris, 2008; Forlin & Lian, 2008).

5.4 Resources
Even though for the past thirty years, we have witnessed drastic economic development in China, making itself the second biggest GDP increasing country as well as the most thriving developing country in the 21st century, we still see substantial differences between the city and rural areas (Ding, 2008), leading to different allocations of the fund and basic infrastructure. Moreover, financial constraints have always been a significant barrier to quality educational services for all children in China (Huang & Wheeler, 2007). In addition, a lack of EI services may lead parents to travel thousands of miles from less developed cities to big cities like Beijing and Shanghai to seek such services. Take the children with autism spectrum disorders as an example; the very well-known training center established by parents with children with autism spectrum disorders in Beijing is called 'Xing Xing Yu.’ Very few families have access to the training center because of its limited places.

References


