

A Review of Inclusive Education Development in China

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Abstract: In recent decades, the special educational needs of children with disabilities have garnered widespread attention across the globe. There has been a growing trend towards inclusive education. China, among many other nations, has endeavored to promote inclusive education through legislation, policy, and financial support. This article is a review of inclusive education development in China, with a view to summarizing Chinese experiences in this regard to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive, equitable, and higher-quality education system.

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Introduction

THE notion of inclusive education was first officially advanced in the Salamanca Statement adopted by the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education. The statement calls for promoting the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994). In the past several decades, inclusive education has become a highly valued category of special education. It aims to enable children with physical or mental disabilities to share regular learning environments with their normal peers through purposeful and systematic arrangements and to support them to achieve the fullest educational progress and social integration (Lu, 2020). In a regular school setting, the two groups of students learn to understand, accept, and cooperate with each other, working for common development. In inclusive schools, special education students are typically provided with appropriate specialized services to help them overcome learning difficulties and increase classroom engagement. These supportive services may include individualized teaching and tutoring plans, rehabilitation therapy, specialist support, and more (Lan, 2023). There are diverse forms of inclusive education, such as the inclusive class, where children with special educational needs are educated with normal students in a regular class in an ordinary school, and the specialized class for special education students in a regular school. In addition, there are individualized special education programs such as one-on-one tutoring and rehabilitation and education-integrated instruction. These forms of education can be flexibly combined to best suit the needs of special education students (Li, 2019).

Experiences in many countries demonstrate that the integration of children with disabilities is best achieved within inclusive schools that serve all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). The United States, through legislation and policy, ensures children with special needs the opportunity to receive education among their normal peers. The “individualized education programs” in America provide special education students with specialized services in their attendance at inclusive schools (Peng, 2023). The UK government encourages regular schools to include children with special educational needs by offering additional financial support. Its Special Needs Education Policy Framework guarantees the education choice of this special group (Jing & Deng, 2013).

China, as a populous country, has a large number of children with disabilities, for whom the special school and inclusive school are the two chief forms of schooling at the basic education level (Xie & Lin, 2024). As of 2020, there were 439,000 special needs children receiving inclusive education, and those enrolled in inclusive classes represented roughly 50% of

the total number of special needs children (Rjzone.cn, 2022). Actively promoting and practicing inclusive education is of vital significance for the construction of a more equitable, inclusive, and efficient education system in China (Xie & Lin, 2024). This article is a review of inclusive education development in China, seeking to summarize Chinese experiences in this regard in order to provide implications for the high-quality development of special education in this country.

The History of Inclusive Education Development in China

When benefiting Chinese children with special educational needs, inclusive education also advances the entire education system of China. The principles of equity and inclusion underlying inclusive education are of vital significance for the cultivation of qualified citizens and the modernization of education in this country. The development process of inclusive education in China can be divided into four stages: initial exploration of inclusive education with Chinese characteristics (1978–1989), institutionalization of inclusive education (1990–2005), steady improvement of inclusive education (2006–2013), and high-quality development of inclusive education (2014–present), with each stage being marked by respective policy breakthroughs and major reformatory events (Zhou, 2023).

The First Stage (1978–1989): Initial Exploration of Inclusive Education with Chinese Characteristics

Prior to its reform and opening up, China underwent stagnancy in education development, and the attention paid to special education was insufficient. The initiation of national reform and opening up policy at the end of the 1970s catalyzed the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, which positively informed its special education (Hu, 2023). The state's recognition of the right of the disabled to education opportunities was a precondition for inclusive education development. The revised 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China affirms that every citizen of this country has the right and obligation to receive education and that the state and society have the responsibility to aid the blind, deaf, mute, and other disabled citizens in education, employment, and living (Liu, 2021). The representation of the issue of special needs education in the Constitution is a fundamental guarantee of the right of the disabled to education. In its "*Decision on Education System Reform*," released in May 1985, the central government proposed to actively develop special education for physically disabled and intellectually subnormal children. This decision marked a substantive step for special education

development and laid the groundwork for the emergence of inclusive education in China in that it officially announced the state's commitment to education for children with special needs (Jiang, 2019).

The Compulsory Education Law of China, enacted in 1986, stipulates that regional governments at all levels shall establish special education schools (or classes) for blind, deaf, and mentally retarded children. This law first proposed the concept of “three-category special education” and placed it high on the agenda of basic education (Duan et al., 2022). In practicing “three-category special education,” educational authorities realized that special education schools alone could not sufficiently address the education needs of the school-age population with disabilities and thus began to explore a more inclusive approach that had the potential to break down the boundaries between special and regular education (Yao, 2023).

In its “*Opinions on Several Issues Concerning the Implementation of the Compulsory Education Law*,” the National Education Commission of China (the precursor of the Ministry of Education) noted that compulsory education for children with disabilities should be implemented in more flexible and diverse forms and that, in addition to special education schools, special teaching classes could be set up within ordinary primary and junior secondary schools to enroll children who had minor disabilities and were capable of learning in normal school settings. This is the first government paper that explicitly stipulates children with disabilities can enter ordinary schools, marking the first step in China's practice of inclusive education (Wang, 2020).

In the “*Syllabuses for Day-time Schools (Classes) for Subnormal Children (Draft for Soliciting Opinions)*,” issued in December 1987, the National Education Commission claimed that in the process of primary education popularization, most children with less severe mental disabilities were admitted into inclusive classes in local regular schools and praised the inclusive class as conducive to the constructive interaction between subnormal and normal children, promoting it as an effective solution to the issue of enrollment of children with minor mental disabilities in areas where there were no special education schools, particularly in rural areas. For the first time, the notion of “inclusive classes within regular schools” appeared in a state-level education policy (Chen, 2022).

In 1989, the State Council issued “*Several Opinions on Special Education Development*,” setting forth guidelines, policies, specific goals and tasks, and leadership and management mechanisms for advancing special education. The paper stressed that the popularization of special education was the priority, considering the less than 6% enrollment rate of school-age blind and deaf children in China, and set concrete targets for the enrollment rates of school-age blind, deaf, and less severely retarded children in the ensuing years (Li, 2023). The “*Outline of Five-Year Services for the Disabled*

in China (1988–1992)” advocates diverse forms of special education, including special education classes or inclusive classes in regular schools, special classes commissioned by orphanages, and formal special education schools, to ensure the provision of education to the maximum number of children with impairments (Zhang, 2022). The implementation of policies like these was a significant step towards the establishment of wider-scope inclusive education in China.

The Second Stage (1990–2005): Institutionalization of Inclusive Education

In this period, driven by the national strategy of “strengthening the nation through science and education,” education development was prioritized in China. Under the goal of popularizing nine-year compulsory education, basic education reform became a primary focus. In this context, special education in China underwent accelerated advancement. In the meantime, the notion and practice of inclusive education in the international community have profoundly informed Chinese special education. Implementing special education through legislation has become a popular practice in many countries around the world, and inclusive education in China entered the process of institutionalized development under this trend (Pang, 2020).

A framework of specialized legislation on special education is crucial for guaranteeing the right of the disabled to education. It protects them from being discriminated against in their pursuit of educational resources and opportunities. Additionally, it provides explicit legal guidance for the implementation of special education, helping optimize education resource allocation and enhance education outcomes (Zhang, 2022).

In the 1990 People with Disabilities Act of China, there is a separate section dedicated to the issue of special education, setting forth the policies, methods, and management requirements for special needs education. It provides that persons with disabilities can be educated in either regular or special education schools and clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of regular education institutions for the education of the disabled (NPC.cn, 2012). “Regulations on Education of Persons with Disabilities,” the first binding regulations on special needs education in China, were issued in 1994, which adopted “inclusive classes within regular schools,” “special classes in ordinary schools,” and special education schools as the three chief forms of schooling for children with disabilities at the compulsory education level (Yang, 2021). “*Measures for Implementing the ‘Inclusive Classes within Regular Schools’ Initiative (Trial)*,” released in the same year, stipulate the specific operational procedures of the initiative, providing legal underpinnings for the adoption of the inclusive class (National Education Commission, 1994). Acts and regulations like these constitute a comprehensive

framework of legislation for special needs education, providing institutional guarantees for the further development of inclusive education in China.

With the increased attention on special education from society, particularly from educators at regular schools, the practice of “inclusive classes within regular schools” underwent accelerated advancement. The inclusive class was well received by parents of children with special education needs in that it allowed their kids the opportunity to access education in regular school settings (Zhou, 2023).

Both “*The Outline of the Plan for the Work on Persons with Disabilities in China during the Eighth Five-Year Plan Period (1991-1995)*” (Shenzhen Disabled Persons’ Federation, 2004) and “*The Implementation Plan for Compulsory Education of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities during the Ninth Five-Year Plan Period*” (China Disabled Persons’ Federation, 2007), released in 1991 and 1996, respectively, proposed to popularize the practice of “Inclusive Classes within Regular Schools,” placing it in a leading position in the special education system. The 5th International Conference on Special Education 2000 focused on the issue of inclusive education and held thorough discussions about the policies, conceptions, and practices of this form of education in various countries, with particular attention paid to how to change the role of special education schools to better promote the development of inclusive education. China’s practice of “inclusive classes within regular schools” was well acclaimed at the conference (China Education and Research Computer Network, 2001).

Between 2001 and 2005, the Chinese government continued to actively popularize inclusive classes to increase the enrollment rate of children with disabilities at the compulsory education level (Wang, 2022). The local education departments began to routinize their management of inclusive classes, which means they would include the following aspects in their routine administration of inclusive classes: curriculum design and teaching organization, analysis and exploitation of educational resources, tests and assessment, education and teaching research, student management and services, teacher education and training, etc. (Zhu, 2023). In 2003, the Ministry of Education held a specialized conference on the program of “Inclusive Classes within Regular Schools” for all actors from around the country to exchange experiences and proposed to accelerate the construction of supporting and guaranteeing mechanisms for the program. Specific arrangements in terms of supporting networks, resource centers, and financial investment were made to improve the enrollment, retention, and performance of children with disabilities (Ministry of Education of China, 2003). The popularization of inclusive classes and the introduction of supporting and guaranteeing mechanisms significantly bolstered the schooling conditions for special education students, and their right to education was better fulfilled (Yao, 2023).

The Third Stage (2006–2013): Steady Improvement of Inclusive Education

Amid rapid economic growth in this period, the Chinese government increased investment in social development, particularly national education (Zhang & Fan, 2019). Meanwhile, the progress in human rights protection for persons with disabilities in China and around the world opened up new opportunities for the welfare of the disabled, including inclusive education. The conception, institution, and practice of inclusive education were steadily improved. The government and society at large made more efforts to fix problems arising in its implementation (Pang, 2020).

The enhanced conception of inclusive education places more emphasis on its potential contribution to social and educational justice. It is expected to play a crucial role in ensuring diversity-valued, equal education for children and facilitating the self-fulfillment of every individual (Zhao, 2022), as well as eliminating prejudices and discrimination of all forms and boosting mutual understanding and respect among all social members (Zhang & Ding, 2022).

2009's "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Special Education" (Ministry of Education of China, 2009) and 2011's "*The Outline of the Development Plan for the Welfare of Persons with Disabilities in China's 12th Five-Year Plan Period*" (China Disabled Persons' Federation, 2011) propose that compulsory education of children with special needs should be funded by the public service system. Additionally, in 2008, China became a signatory to the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which means that it has the obligation to implement the provision in the Convention that the state parties should adopt inclusive education at all education levels and provide persons with disabilities with necessary resources and conveniences (State Council of China, 2008). China's accession to the Convention marked the onset of its pursuit of rights-based welfare for the disabled, eliciting fundamental changes in attitudes towards this special group as well as inclusive education (Pang & Zhang, 2018).

Driven by the updated conception of special education, legislation and regulations related to inclusive education were revised and improved. Based on the original provision on "three-category special education," the revised *Compulsory Education Law 2006* explicitly defines the practice of "inclusive classes within regular schools" as a chief form of compulsory education for children and adolescents with disabilities (State Council of China, 2006). 2009's "*Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Special Education*," a specialized policy for special needs education, presented a systematic framework of provisions on the special education system, including its funding guarantee mechanisms, education quality, teacher staffing, and more

(Ministry of Education of China, 2009). The policy had a profound impact on the further development of inclusive education for children with disabilities.

To improve the quality of inclusive education, the Chinese government developed a series of practical measures that pertain to specific groups of special education students and special education categories. For example, “*The Outline of the Development Plan for the Welfare of Persons with Disabilities in China during the 12th Five-Year Plan Period*” recommends alternative special education forms, such as community-assisted education, home-delivery teaching, and cross-regional enrollment, to ensure the delivery of special education for children and adolescents with severe disabilities (China Disabled Persons’ Federation, 2011). By implementing policies such as “*Measures for Managing Central Subsidy Funds Specialized for Ethnic Minority Education and Special Education (2006)*” (Ministry of Finance of China, 2008) and “*The Plan for the Construction of Special Education Schools in Central and Western Regions in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan Period (2008-2010)*” (Ministry of Education, 2007), China significantly reduced the inter-regional disparities in special education. At this stage, more attention was paid to the fulfillment of potential, character building, and holistic growth in special education students; the special education curriculum programs continued to be optimized; and special education teacher training was considerably strengthened. As a result, the quality of inclusive education was comprehensively enhanced (Pang, 2020).

The Fourth Stage (from 2014 to the Present): High-quality Development of Inclusive Education

In 2014, inclusive education was officially established as the direction of special education development. “The 2014 and 2017 Plans for Upgrading Special Education” both emphasize the nationwide introduction of inclusive education for ensuring the provision of proper education to every child with special needs (State Council of China, 2014; Ministry of Education of China, 2017). The two plans affirmed the necessity of further popularizing the practice of “inclusive classes within regular schools” as the chief measure of inclusive education and promoting cooperation between special and regular education schools. In “*The Outline of the Plan for Supporting the Disabled in Building a Well-Off Life in the 13th Five-Year Plan Period*” released by the State Council in 2016, “inclusive education” was the frequent phrase, being mentioned many times in statements such as “vigorously introducing inclusive education,” “continuously expanding the scale of inclusive education,” “improving action plans for inclusive education at the secondary and tertiary education levels,” and “increasing special education schools’ guidance and backing for regular schools in implementing inclusive education,” to

name a few (State Council of China, 2016). In the revised “*Regulations on Education of Persons with Disabilities (2017)*,” the State Council stressed the necessity of prioritizing the regular schooling method in special education by actively promoting inclusive education (Ministry of Education of China, 2017). They are the first binding regulations that establish inclusive education as the mainstream of special education.

Advances in special education policy have improved education opportunities for children with disabilities. Since 2014, the enrollment of compulsory education-age children in this group has undergone rapid growth. In 2015, 2017, and 2019, it surpassed 400,000, 500,000, and 700,000, respectively. 2019’s enrollment of 794,600 was an increase of 115.9% from 368,100 in 2013 (Ministry of Education of China, 2021). The number of special education students enrolled under the “Inclusive Classes within Regular Schools” program progressively climbed from 191,000 in 2013 to 332,000 in 2018, an increase of 73.8% (State Council of China’s Information Office, 2020). The enrollment of children with visual and hearing impairments remained stable, but that of children with mental retardation, autism, and other types of disabilities saw significant boosts in this period (Ministry of Education of China, 2020).

Along with the expansion of the scale of inclusive education, more emphasis has been placed on the improvement of its quality standards. In 2016, the Ministry of Education released the curriculum standards for “three-category special education” and underlined the learning outcomes of students as the primary indicator of its education quality (Ministry of Education of China, 2016). 2020’s “*Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Implementation of the ‘Inclusive Classes within Regular Schools’ Program for Compulsory Education of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities*” set forth detailed provisions on inclusive education, covering evaluation and accreditation, student enrollment in the proximate school, resource classrooms, curricular content, individualized education schemes, comprehensive assessment of students, and the creation of inclusive campus culture (Ministry of Education, 2020). Comprehensive stipulations in these aspects are meant to ensure the quality standards of inclusive education, taking its development one stage further.

Conclusion

High-quality inclusive education serves to cater for the individual needs of special education students, help them achieve social integration, and provide effective support for their future development. The development of inclusive education also contributes to the advancement of the entire education system, consolidating the foundation of a more harmonious, inclusive, and equitable society. The issue of inclusive education has been high on the educational

agenda of the Chinese government. The success of inclusive schools requires a concerted endeavor by teachers, schools, families, and communities. With continued policy support and increased social concern, more Chinese children with disabilities will benefit from inclusive education, which gives them the opportunity to share quality education with their normal peers.

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