Original Research Article

CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPLORING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CHALLENGES FOR TEACHER IN CHINESE CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study critically reviews the challenges Chinese teachers face in implementing inclusive education, focusing on the unique social, cultural, and systemic factors influencing this educational approach in China. The purpose is to analyse existing literature to highlight barriers at both societal and school levels, where factors such as Confucian cultural values, inadequate training, and limited resources hinder effective inclusivity. Through a synthesis of relevant studies, the review reveals that while initiatives like Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) aim to improve access, they often fall short in fostering comprehensive inclusion for all learners. Findings underscore the need for enhanced professional development, adaptation of Western inclusive practices to fit China's educational context, and a rebalancing of exam-centred education with inclusive principles. In conclusion, the study emphasises the importance of shifting societal perceptions and educational policies to support inclusive education practices in China fully.

Introduction

Inclusive education, an approach rooted in the advocacy for human rights and equality, aims to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their learning needs. In China, the movement towards inclusive education is relatively recent, with initiatives aimed at improving accessibility and inclusivity emerging only in the past few decades (Hu & Szente, 2009). Teachers are pivotal in implementing inclusive practices, as their attitudes, training, and resources profoundly influence the success of these efforts within classrooms. This paper seeks to conduct a small-scale study on the specific challenges Chinese teachers face when incorporating inclusive educational methods, reviewing pertinent studies to develop potential research questions and propose targeted areas for future investigation.

Globally, school populations are increasingly diverse, and inclusive education has been widely adopted to ensure equal access to quality education (UNESCO, 2009). Byintegrating students

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with diverse learning needs, inclusive education promotes a sense of belonging and reduces the need for specialised educational placements (Hyde, 2017). It aligns with the global objective of "Education for All," as endorsed by the United Nations (UNESCO, 2000), and advocates for removing barriers that restrict the participation of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. However, despite growing international support, inclusive education remains challenging to fully implement in many countries, including China.

As China experiences rapid economic growth, it faces significant social challenges, especially in the education sector. While the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) initiative represents an early attempt to address inclusivity, research indicates that China's inclusive education framework remains underdeveloped and overly focused on students with disabilities, often neglecting the broader goals of full inclusion (An et al., 2018; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Xu et al., 2018). This focus limits access to general education for many children with diverse educational needs, leaving substantial gaps in the country's inclusive education efforts.

Data from China's Second National Sample Survey of Disabilities (2006) highlight the challenges faced by a sizable population with disabilities, who often lack the same access to quality education, welfare, and support as their non-disabled peers (Loyalka et al., 2014). Despite government initiatives to enhance special education, including the LRC program, these measures often fall short of fostering genuine inclusion (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016; Hu et al., 2017). Consequently, a more comprehensive approach is needed to address the broad spectrum of inclusivity challenges that teachers encounter.

In this context, teachers play a central role as advocates for inclusion and facilitators of learning for students with special needs. Their perceptions, skills, and the support they receive are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Understanding the barriers teachers face is essential to identifying effective strategies for building inclusive classrooms in China. This paper will explore these challenges, proposing research questions that address the broader implications for teacher training, policy adaptation, and the integration of inclusive education practices within the Chinese educational system.

Literature Review

This literature review of ten key studies provides an in-depth examination of inclusive education in China, highlighting its advocacy as a human rights initiative and identifying critical challenges hindering its effective implementation.

A prominent theme across the literature is the inadequacy of teacher training and professional development. Studies like Materechera (2018) reveal that although teachers support inclusive education, they face major obstacles such as large class sizes and insufficient training resources. Similarly, Hu et al. (2017) find that both pre-service and in-service preschool teachers recognise the value of inclusive education yet struggle to implement it effectively due to inadequate training and development opportunities. Feng (2012) adds that many Chinese teachers are extrinsically motivated but lack specialised skills in inclusive and special education before starting their careers, highlighting gaps in the existing teacher preparation programs. Further supporting this, An et al. (2018) critique these programs for focusing heavily on subject-specific training, limiting opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop inclusive teaching practices.

At the policy level, systemic barriers also hinder inclusive education. Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2016) report that government efforts, particularly the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) model, have failed to improve educational access for students with special needs, especially in Western China. The LRC initiative is challenged by insufficient resources, an unfavorable social culture, and a lack of knowledge and skills among educators. Similarly, Xu et al. (2018) find that the LRC framework does not foster educational equality comparable to that in Western nations, emphasising that its major shortfall is its inability to provide equal opportunities for all students. An et

al. (2018) recommend that China adapt best practices from countries with advanced inclusive education systems to overcome these barriers.

Stakeholder perspectives further influence the success of inclusive education. Su et al. (2020) explore views of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), parents of typically developing children, and teachers, finding that while attitudes toward inclusion are positive, there remains a need for greater awareness and experience with ASD to enhance understanding among stakeholders. Cultural factors are another significant barrier, as Chinese society's Confucian-heritage values promote adherence to social norms and can marginalise individuals with disabilities (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016). Feng (2012) supports this finding, revealing that special education teachers often feel undervalued, leading to low job satisfaction and high turnover rates.

Teacher competence and burnout present additional challenges within the inclusive education landscape. Mu et al. (2015) examines the competencies of LRC teachers in Beijing, identifying four essential components: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency.

The study indicates that the lack of supportive infrastructure restricts teachers' ability to foster inclusion effectively. Talmor et al. (2005) investigate burnout factors among inclusive education teachers, finding that insufficient resources and support often lead to higher burnout rates, impacting teachers' efficacy in promoting inclusion. Yan and Deng (2018) find that regular classroom teachers' beliefs regarding the feasibility of inclusive education heavily influence their practices, underscoring the importance of professional development in fostering inclusive education in China.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese teachers in implementing inclusive education. The research uses a critical literature review approach, which allows for the identification of common themes and perspectives, providing insights into the barriers within China's inclusive education framework (Snyder, 2019). Literature reviews are valuable for consolidating existing knowledge, identifying research gaps, and synthesising findings across multiple studies (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

Data were collected through a systematic review of academic articles, reports, and studies focused on inclusive education in China. A systematic review approach aids in filtering relevant sources that address teacher training, cultural influences, policy constraints, and stakeholder perspectives on inclusive education (Grant & Booth, 2009). Specifically, this review focuses on studies accessible through reputable academic databases, ensuring that the information is derived from credible and peer-reviewed sources.

The selected studies were thematically analysed to extract key challenges and recurring themes affecting inclusive education in China. This process involved coding each source according to relevant categories, such as training gaps, policy limitations, cultural factors, and stakeholder perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying patterns within qualitative data, making it suitable for synthesising insights from a diverse set of studies (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

The study is limited to literature available in English, accessed through academic databases, which may restrict the scope of findings (Meline, 2006). While qualitative insights are invaluable for understanding complex challenges, this approach may not fully capture the quantitative impact of inclusive education policies in China. Moreover, a reliance on secondary sources might introduce bias, as findings are interpreted within the context of prior research rather than primary data collection (Snyder, 2019). Nonetheless, this methodology offers a structured framework for analysing existing research systematically, guiding further investigation into effective strategies for enhancing inclusive education in the Chinese context.

Teachers' challenges in a social context

Numerous societal elements, such as historical and cultural values, political ideology, and social structures, have a continual effect and modification on education in China. As an educational practice, inclusive education in China is heavily influenced by the country's distinctive social setting, which may create difficulties and obstacles for classroom instructors as they practise inclusion.

Chinese civilisation is founded on the intellectual foundation of Confucian-heritage culture, which is supported by distinctive values and traditions that are significantly distinct from Western contemporary cultures (Xu et al., 2018). The Confucian worldview demands people to adhere to social norms and discourages people from acting in a manner inconsistent with their social standing (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). According to Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2016), the Confucian tradition in China is likely to produce an unfavourable social culture about special and inclusive education, since people have a propensity to view the disabled as inferior and special and inclusive education as unnecessary. Feng's (2012) study findings give empirical evidence for this notion. Feng interviewed a group of special schoolteachers, and many of them expressed the same worry that their work was undervalued by society and that their social standing was relatively poor as special school instructors. Teachers in special education settings do not find their work satisfying and lack a sense of self (Feng, 2012). When instructors struggle to find purpose in their everyday job, it is difficult for them to complete prescribed tasks successfully and efficiently, much alone make innovative and inspirational classroom adjustments.

In addition, Chinese society takes pleasure in its collectivism, which is promoted by the communist government (Hawkins et al.,2001). In a society where individual rights and freedom must yield to or even be sacrificed for collective interests (Xu et al., 2018), vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are less likely to be valued because they may be viewed as a burden on others and the entire society due to their special needs. In contrast, the primary value and philosophy behind inclusive education is respect for individual differences and rights, to achieve a socially just and equitable society (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011), which is in opposition with the collective ideals ingrained in Chinese society. On the other hand, according to Xu et al. (2018), although it is typical in Chinese culture for the powerful to assist the weak, they do it out of compassion and charity rather than a sense of empowerment and equality. Without an emphasis on individual diversity and empowerment, it would be impossible to establish an inclusive educational initiative that values the development of every student with special learning needs (Xu et al., 2018), and children with disabilities may not be able to become contributing citizens in the future. For instance, LRC a Chinese version of inclusive educational practice initiated by the government in the mid-1980s (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016), is widely believed to successfully expand the access of children with disabilities to general education, but it fails to recognise and promote the individual diversity among children in inclusive education (An et al., 2018; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016; Xu et al., 2018). Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2016) state that LRC policy permits kids with impairments to attend regular schools and learn alongside their peers. However, only children with mild disabilities and adequate learning capacities can be included in general classrooms and study with typically developing children, typically with little additional support and services; consequently, there is still a sizable population of children with severe disabilities who are denied access to general education and are relegated to segregated special educational institutions (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016; Xu et al., 2018). Despite the hurdles posed by conventional societal norms and uneven inclusive education regulations in China, instructors may confront additional obstacles in their daily school-level teaching activities.

Teacher's challenges in school context

A synthesis of relevant studies reveals that Chinese educators face numerous challenges in implementing inclusive education, with one of the most significant issues being educators' varied attitudes toward inclusion. For instance, Hu et al. (2017) found that while both pre-service and in-service early childhood education (ECE) teachers recognise the importance of high-quality inclusive education, they remain sceptical about its feasibility in the Chinese context. Although data from 2017

indicate that nearly half of Chinese teachers received some special education training (Deng et al., 2017), the available courses for pre-service teachers are limited, and in-service teachers often lack access to continuous professional development programs within their schools (Hu et al., 2017). Consistent findings across multiple studies (An et al., 2018; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2016; Feng, 2012; Xu et al., 2018; Yan & Deng, 2018) highlight that teacher preparation programs in China generally focus on specific subject areas, leaving limited scope for teachers to acquire skills in inclusive pedagogies that support students with diverse learning needs.

Yan and Deng (2018) label these educators as "inexperienced implementers" due to their insufficient professional knowledge and skills in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, which raises their concerns about the viability of inclusive practices. This aligns with Talmor et al. (2005) study on teacher burnout in inclusive education, which identified a negative relationship between teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion and their job satisfaction. Teachers who see value in inclusion are more prone to burnout, primarily due to inadequate professional skills and resources to execute inclusive teaching effectively.

Another significant barrier in inclusive education for Chinese teachers is the lack of a supportive school environment (Mu et al., 2015; Su et al., 2020). Research analysing stakeholder attitudes toward inclusion indicates that classroom teachers in China hold the least favourable views on inclusive education compared to parents of children with or without special educational needs (Su et al., 2020). This scepticism is compounded by the highly competitive and exam-oriented Chinese educational system, where many teachers (16.3%) believe that students with special needs struggle to succeed in general education settings, as they may find the academic demands overwhelming. Large class sizes and restricted teaching time further limit teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively (An et al., 2018; Materechera, 2018; Su et al., 2020). Although many teachers are willing to support students with unique learning needs, high-stakes assessments often force them to prioritise students without special needs, a challenge particularly prevalent in Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) settings.

Conclusion and Implications

In implementing inclusive education, Chinese educators encounter unique challenges stemming from societal and school-level barriers. Culturally, traditional Confucian-heritage values and collectivist ideals often undermine the importance of individual differences, presenting a significant environmental challenge to inclusive education. Within schools, educators' limited skills in supporting students with special needs and inconsistent views about inclusion present obstacles that inhibit effective implementation. Notably, existing studies on inclusive education in China tend to focus on identifying challenges rather than offering practical strategies to support teachers in fostering inclusivity in their classrooms.

The findings of this paper underscore the importance of further research into several key questions. How can pre-service teachers acquire specialised skills and knowledge needed to support inclusive classrooms? Is it possible to adapt Western inclusive practices to align with China's unique cultural and educational context? Furthermore, how can Chinese educational systems balance their exam-focused orientation with the need to provide equal learning opportunities for students with specific needs? There is a pressing need for research into professional development programs for teachers in inclusive education, with a focus on practical approaches that can enhance day-to-day classroom practices in China. Analysing effective instances of school inclusion and implementing evidence-based inclusive pedagogies and practices will be essential in creating a robust theoretical framework for inclusive education in the Chinese context.

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