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Closing the Policy–Practice Gap in Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in China: A Critical Narrative Review

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Abstract: In China, inclusive education has been promoted as a key mechanism to safeguard the educational rights of students with disabilities. Official statistics show that, as of the end of 2024, the compulsory education enrollment rate for children with disabilities has reached 97%, indicating broad policy coverage. However, this figure mainly reflects access rather than the quality of inclusion. From the perspective of educational equity and the right to education, this critical narrative review examines the policy–practice gap in inclusive education in China, with particular attention to students with disabilities. Drawing on national and local policy documents, existing empirical studies, and publicly available educational statistics, the paper identifies persistent gaps between macro-level policy design and grassroots implementation. Many schools complete administrative placement tasks but fail to provide differentiated instruction, individualized rehabilitation, psychological support, and inclusive campus participation. The gap is shaped by overly general policy provisions, weak assessment and accountability mechanisms, imbalanced urban–rural resource allocation, insufficient special education funding, limited professional competence among regular teachers, a shortage of specialized teachers, underdeveloped inclusive school culture, and weak home–school collaboration. These problems reduce inclusive education to a formalistic arrangement and weaken the substantive right of students with disabilities to quality education. The paper argues that closing the policy–practice gap requires refined and operable implementation standards, stronger supervision and accountability, targeted resource investment, integrated service provision, teacher training and incentive mechanisms, and collaborative governance among schools, families, and communities. By doing so, China can move from scale-oriented enrollment to high-quality, rights-based inclusive education and better promote educational equity.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Students with Disabilities, Right to Education, Policy–Practice Gap, Educational Equality.

1. Introduction

The improvement in compulsory education enrollment rates for children with disabilities clearly reflects the achievements made in China's special education system. According to statistics from the end of 2024, the enrollment rate for this group in compulsory education reached 97% [1]. Retrospective literature also indicates that, as special education reforms continue, access to education for children with disabilities has steadily expanded [2]. The refinement of the legal framework has been a key factor supporting this progress. The revision of the Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities and the official promulgation of the Law on Preschool Education have solidified, at the legal level, the right of children with disabilities to equal access to education. These two laws also establish concrete standards for constructing accessible school environments, providing in-school support services, and implementing individualized instruction. As these systems are progressively implemented, barriers that previously hindered enrollment for children with disabilities have been continuously alleviated, making participation in compulsory education by school-age children with disabilities a widespread educational practice.

However, merely achieving growth in enrollment figures does not mean that the goal of high-quality special education has been attained. Against the backdrop of ongoing transformation in basic education, the shortcomings of traditional segregated placement models have gradually become apparent. Such models place students with disabilities in separate educational settings, focusing primarily on single-skill training, which fails to align with modern educational values emphasizing individual potential development and holistic growth. In response to these practical limitations, inclusive education has emerged as the mainstream direction for reform in China's special education system [3]. Inclusive education eliminates institutional barriers between regular schools and special education, creating conditions for students with disabilities to participate in mainstream classrooms. By being part of real classroom communities, students can keep pace with standard academic curricula, develop social skills through peer interaction, and achieve positive development in both academic abilities and psychological well-being. This study analyzes the issue based on theories of educational equity and inclusive education, defining education as an inherent fundamental right for all citizens, rather than a specialized welfare provided exclusively to people with disabilities [4].

Most current inclusive education policies only provide macro guidance and have not formulated detailed implementation rules for local differences. Economic levels, school resources, and the number of students with disabilities vary in different regions. Current policies have not made targeted adjustments, and grassroots schools lack clear implementation standards, making it difficult to carry out inclusive teaching tailored to the actual situation of the school. As of the end of 2024, the enrollment rate of 97% can only reflect the coverage of special education. This indicator does not fully reflect the quality of classroom teaching and the level of supporting services in grassroots schools, and it truly reflects the current problem of special education focusing on

scale and neglecting quality.

Existing empirical studies on county and township primary and secondary schools indicate that the implementation effect of inclusive education at the grassroots level is not ideal, and the problem of formalism is very prominent [5]. Most schools simply place students with disabilities in regular classes without considering their physical and mental characteristics, cognitive abilities, and developing individualized teaching plans. Schools generally do not provide targeted services such as ability training and psychological counseling. Many students with disabilities are only in regular classrooms but cannot truly participate in classroom learning and campus activities. Some schools accept students with disabilities only to complete assessment tasks set by higher authorities and do not pay attention to individual differences or implement personalized education management. The unified curriculum setting and fixed teaching mode of general education schools are insufficiently adapted to the differentiated learning rhythm of students with disabilities. Key measures such as differentiated instruction and professional rehabilitation in inclusive education are difficult to implement in grassroots schools. Such superficial inclusive education fundamentally cannot meet the individualized learning needs of students with disabilities and cannot support their long-term development. For special education to develop healthily, it is necessary to change the development mode of expansion of scale, focus on improving teaching quality and educational content, and promote inclusive education to be implemented more solidly and meticulously, gradually narrowing the distance between policy design and grassroots school practice.

2. Review Approach

This study focuses on the disabled student group and employs a critical narrative review to interpret three types of materials: policy documents on inclusive education at all levels, public educational statistics, and empirical research within the field. The literature is sourced from academic databases and government public websites, with search terms including inclusive education, inclusive schooling, disabled students, policy-practice disconnection, educational equity, and China. After comparing various materials, the study found multiple interrelated practical problems.

There is a lack of supporting institutional systems at the grassroots level, and many policy provisions are merely written down and difficult to be implemented in school daily management. The available resources in regular classes are limited, and disabled students have difficulty continuously obtaining appropriate classroom support. There are insufficient teachers capable of conducting inclusive teaching, and the stable maintenance of classroom-level inclusive practices is difficult. The inherent social perceptions affect the willingness of schools and classes to accept disabled students. These factors interweave with each other, resulting in a gap between policy concepts and on-the-ground school operations, and providing material support for discussions on optimization directions.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses tend to comprehensively sort out all relevant literature. This study did not follow this approach. The research combines theoretical foundations with the real scenarios of policy implementation and observes the execution of inclusive education policies at the grassroots level. It identifies the links in the policy promotion process that have not yet produced substantive changes. Secondary data is difficult to obtain completely, and the data coverage range has boundaries, which are the shortcomings of this review. Despite these limitations, the critical analysis framework established by the research can still be used to analyze the real contradictions arising from the implementation of inclusive education policies in China.

3. Institutional Barriers: Insufficient Policy Refinement and Absence of Assessment and Accountability Mechanisms

3.1. The Policy Provisions Are Overly General at the Macro Level, and There are No Practical Operational Standards for Their Implementation at the Grassroots Level

National and provincial-level inclusive education policies are mainly used to plan the overall development direction of special education nationwide, and only provide basic and framework-like requirements. The policies do not take into account the school-running conditions, teaching staff levels, and the number of students with disabilities at the grassroots level, and do not formulate quantifiable and directly implementable execution standards. Although the existing policy system is overall complete, it lacks specific and operational clauses [6]. The grassroots inclusive education lacks unified implementation basis and standardized operation models. There are significant differences in resources and student populations across different regions, making it difficult for macro policies to be adapted to actual situations. Moreover, most of these policies are merely advocating and lack strict constraints. The current laws ensure the enrollment of disabled students, but there are gaps in supporting implementation rules, barrier-free construction, stratified teaching and assessment norms. The excessive autonomy of grassroots schools leads to a lack of effective supervision, and significant differences in school development exist among different schools, which hinders the balanced and high-quality development of special education.

3.2. The Evaluation and Accountability System is Not Well-Established, and There is a Lack of Internal Driving Force for Grassroots Education

For a long time, the core of domestic basic education has been test-oriented evaluation. Students' test scores and schools' enrollment rates have been the core indicators for school rating, resource allocation, and teacher performance assessment. Influenced by this evaluation model, education departments and grassroots schools have focused their main resources and efforts on regular subject teaching. Work such as inclusive education construction, individualized assistance for students with disabilities, and inclusive campus construction accounted for very little in assessment and basically did not affect the assessment results of schools and teachers [7]. This unreasonable assessment structure has led grassroots schools to generally neglect the educational value of inclusive education. Most schools merely passively complete the basic tasks of admitting students with disabilities and do not actively implement in-depth educational work. The formalism problem in overall school operation is very prominent.

A sound supervision and accountability mechanism is the

key to ensuring the implementation of educational policies and regulating school operation behaviors. Currently, the supervision system for special education in China still has many loopholes. The coverage of daily supervision is small, the number of special inspections is few, and the punishment for schools' illegal operations is weak. Existing research has documented that many grassroots schools passively handle the policy of inclusive education in regular classes, some implicitly reject students with disabilities, and others idle or misappropriate special education resources [8]. Due to the lack of strict punishment rules, regulatory authorities have no way to restrain schools' illegal behaviors. This has led to a disconnection between the active introduction of policies by higher authorities and the passive implementation by grassroots schools, hindering the standardized and regular development of inclusive education [9].

4. Resource Deficiency: Imbalance of Supporting Resources and Insufficient Educational Guarantees

4.1. The Imbalance in Hardware Resource Allocation is Quite Pronounced, with Significant Disparities between Urban and Rural Areas as well as among Different Schools

Standard resource classrooms, professional special education equipment, and fully covered campus accessibility facilities form the basic hardware for high-quality inclusive education, directly determining the learning, movement, and rehabilitation quality of students with disabilities. Affected by the urban–rural dual education structure, the allocation of special education hardware resources in China is highly unbalanced, with a significant urban–rural gap. Urban primary and secondary schools have basically completed the standardization upgrade of special education hardware, with fully covered accessibility facilities, complete rehabilitation equipment, and teaching aids. They can fully meet the learning and rehabilitation needs of students with disabilities. County-level and rural schools have very weak hardware foundations and generally face problems such as aging equipment, single types of teaching aids, and inadequate accessibility renovations. This directly limits the quality improvement of rural inclusive education. The huge urban–rural hardware gap not only reduces the learning and rehabilitation outcomes of rural students with disabilities but also continuously widens the development gap in special education between urban and rural areas, exacerbating the issue of unfair distribution of basic educational resources. There is a significant disparity in the construction of special education facilities in primary and secondary schools across the country. Urban schools have well-equipped facilities, while schools in remote and underdeveloped areas have limited funds, lagging in accessibility renovations, and are short of equipment, making it difficult for inclusive education to meet standards [10].

4.2. The Special Funds are Insufficiently Guaranteed, and the Integrated Service System has Not Yet been Established

Compared with ordinary basic education, the work content of inclusive education is more detailed and complex. Tasks such as differentiated instruction, individualized rehabilitation, academic guidance, teacher training, and equipment maintenance all require stable financial support, and the operating costs are relatively higher. Most grassroots schools in China do not have an independent special education special fund. The long-term shortage of funds has prevented the implementation of refined and specialized special education services on a regular basis [11]. Grassroots schools also commonly have the problem of "emphasizing procurement but neglecting use and maintenance." A large number of special education equipment and teaching resources lack daily management and application, and high-quality resources are left idle and wasted, unable to truly help students with disabilities grow. General education and special education have long been separated, resulting in difficulties in resource allocation, insufficient special education resources at the grassroots level, and the absence of a comprehensive special education service system. This has widened the gap between policy goals and the actual situation of grassroots school operations.

5. Teacher Shortage: Weak Professional Capabilities and Lack of Job Security

5.1. The Overall Professional Ability of Regular Teachers in Special Education is Relatively Weak

In domestic teacher education and in-service teacher training, the core content is usually regular subject teaching and classroom management. Specialized training on special education theories, student behavior intervention, and professional rehabilitation training is very scarce. The deficiencies in the training system have led to the fact that the vast majority of ordinary teachers have not received systematic special education training and lack practical experience in educating students with disabilities, behavior correction, and rehabilitation guidance. In response to the differentiated learning needs of students with disabilities, most teachers are unable to accurately judge the learning situation, design differentiated teaching, and carry out targeted assistance, failing to meet the professional teaching standards of special education [12]. Regular teachers also express concerns about inclusive education because they feel inadequately prepared for its demands. In addition, teachers' perceived feasibility of response-to-intervention practices in inclusive settings remains limited [13].

The lack of teachers' professional capabilities is the core human factor for the poor educational effect of inclusive education at the grassroots level. In daily teaching, most teachers are unable to accurately grasp the cognitive characteristics and learning weaknesses of students with disabilities, and cannot adjust teaching plans according to individual differences. The fixed classroom rhythm, unified teaching mode, and single evaluation method of ordinary schools are seriously inconsistent with the learning ability and cognitive rhythm of students with disabilities. These practical problems have caused inclusive education at the grassroots level to generally fall into the predicament of "easy admission but difficult improvement," leaving inclusive education only with an external form and completely lacking the core educational connotation.

5.2. There Is a Significant Shortage of Professional Teachers, and the Incentive Mechanism for Positions Is Relatively Lacking

Full-time resource teachers and special education support teachers are the core forces driving the professional development of inclusive education. The number and professional level of the teaching staff directly affect the quality of inclusive education at the grassroots level. Currently, most grassroots schools are lacking full-time special education professionals. Problems such as tight educational staffing, remote locations of grassroots areas, and low attractiveness of special education positions have made it difficult for grassroots schools to recruit and retain professional special education teachers. Most grassroots schools that implement inclusive education have not fully staffed full-time personnel and can only have ordinary teachers take on part-time responsibilities for managing students with disabilities. The professional teacher guarantee system is thus ineffective. The role transformation from regular teachers to resource-room teachers also remains challenging.

The work difficulty and workload of special education positions are much higher than those of ordinary teaching positions. After teachers complete their regular teaching tasks, they also need to be responsible for individualized tutoring for students with disabilities, rehabilitation guidance, communication between families and schools, and the construction of inclusive campuses. However, grassroots schools do not include these additional workloads in performance evaluations, and teachers' excessive labor is not recognized or compensated with salary increases. At the same time, policies for professional title evaluation, career advancement, and welfare security in special education positions are not well-established, resulting in low job attractiveness, weak professional sense of belonging among teachers, serious teacher attrition, and further widening the shortage of special education teachers at the grassroots level [14]. Teachers' intentions to enact inclusive education are also shaped by subjective norms and school support, while leadership and teacher efficacy can influence their commitment to inclusive practices.

6. Cognitive Bias: Insufficient Inclusive Atmosphere and Devaluation of Integration Philosophy

6.1. The Construction of Campus Inclusiveness is Lagging Behind, and the Phenomenon of Implicit Discrimination Still Exists

Some school administrators place too much emphasis on examination results and enrollment rates, making their educational practices overly utilitarian. Such administrators only aim to meet the enrollment standards for students with disabilities and do not attach importance to improving the quality and content of inclusive education. This is the main subjective reason for the formalized development of grassroots inclusive education. Currently, routine campus culture construction in primary and secondary schools has become relatively mature, but the construction of inclusive culture for students with disabilities has been progressing slowly and is monotonous, without forming a regular construction mechanism. The long-standing stereotypes of disabled groups in society will gradually permeate the campus environment, affecting the cognition of teachers, students, and parents, and hindering the in-depth promotion of inclusive education.

Most teachers and parents have relatively little knowledge and delayed understanding of special education, which further exacerbates group segregation within the campus. People are not familiar with the physical and mental characteristics and learning needs of students with disabilities, making it difficult to create a campus atmosphere of inclusiveness and mutual assistance. Some parents of students without disabilities are worried that students with disabilities attending regular classes will disrupt classroom order and lower overall class performance, and they have implicit exclusionary attitudes toward students with disabilities. A low campus inclusive atmosphere is likely to cause negative psychological effects such as inferiority and isolation in students with disabilities, making it difficult for them to integrate into the class collective and participate in peer interactions.

Research on rural Chinese primary schools has shown that peer acceptance, rejection, belonging, and bullying remain serious challenges for students with disabilities [15]. School climate and leadership also matter for teachers' inclusive intentions and practices [16]. Ultimately, schools only achieve the physical entry of students with disabilities, but deep integration in psychological and social aspects cannot be realized.

6.2. There is a Deviation in the Concepts of Home and School, and the Effectiveness of Collaborative Education Is Limited

The physical and mental rehabilitation, ability enhancement, and personality formation of students with disabilities is a long-term process. It is far from enough for schools to act alone. Collaboration between schools and families is the key to improving the quality of inclusive education. Currently, most parents have a relatively shallow understanding of inclusive education and do not attach importance to specialized education for students with disabilities and home-based rehabilitation training. Some parents overly rely on school education and neglect the important role of family companionship and daily behavior correction; some parents have no high expectations for students' development and adopt a laissez-faire educational approach, causing students to miss crucial growth and rehabilitation opportunities and significantly reducing the educational effectiveness of inclusive education [17].

The integrated education model of schools, special education institutions, families, and communities has been unable to be implemented at the grassroots level. The responsibilities of each educational entity are unclear, communication is poor, cooperation is loose, and education work is fragmented, unable to form an effective educational synergy. The lack of a collaborative mechanism continuously widens the gap between policies and practice, restricting the high-quality development of inclusive education with its connotation.

7. Closing the Gap: An Optimized Path for the High-Quality Development of Inclusive Education

7.1. Refining Implementation Standards and Establishing Assessment and Accountability Mechanisms

The main reason why basic inclusive education is overly formalized and difficult to improve is that policy implementation standards are unclear and assessment and supervision efforts are insufficient. Local education authorities need to combine the actual situation of local school operations, abandon the extensive and uniform management approach, refine detailed implementation rules for inclusive education, and establish a standardized school operation system that is quantifiable, supervisable, and assessable. Relevant departments should unify implementation standards for key links such as admission review, campus renovation, differentiated instruction, resource allocation, and quality assessment, and regulate school operation behaviors within their jurisdiction. At the same time, the quality of inclusive education, the development effect of students with disabilities, and the construction of inclusive campuses should be included in comprehensive education assessment. A regular supervision and accountability mechanism should be established to ensure that schools fulfill their main responsibilities for school operation. This will fundamentally solve the problems of policy implementation distortion and formalization of school operation.

7.2. Balancing Resource Allocation and Improving the Integrated Service System

The uneven distribution of resources between urban and rural areas and weak hardware support are the biggest obstacles to improving the quality of basic inclusive education at the grassroots level. All levels of finance and education departments should increase investment in inclusive education special funds and focus on supporting educationally weak areas in counties and villages to fill gaps in hardware such as barrier-free campus renovations, resource classroom construction, and special education equipment provision. Grassroots schools should change the wrong practice of only purchasing without using, establish a regular management, update, and application mechanism for special education resources, avoid the waste of resources, and fully utilize the educational role of existing resources. All regions should integrate high-quality resources from regular education and special education within the region, build a service platform for teacher transfer, resource sharing, and school-to-school assistance, and establish a comprehensive educational model covering academic guidance, rehabilitation training, psychological counseling, and character cultivation to precisely meet the individualized growth needs of students with disabilities.

7.3. Strengthening Teacher Preparation, Professional Staffing, and Incentives

The lack of professional competence among regular teachers and the shortage of special education teachers require systematic solutions. First, teacher education and in-service training should incorporate special education theories, differentiated instruction, behavior intervention, and rehabilitation guidance, so that regular teachers can better meet the needs of students with disabilities. Schools should also provide multidimensional classroom support and professional learning communities for inclusive education teachers. Second, local governments should establish a staffing guarantee system for resource-room teachers and special education support teachers, promote the role transformation of resource-room teachers, and clarify their professional duties. Third, social support and professional recognition for inclusive education teachers should be strengthened. Fourth, workload related to individualized tutoring, rehabilitation guidance, family–school communication, and inclusive campus construction should be included in performance evaluation and salary compensation. Teachers' intentions to implement inclusive education are influenced by subjective norms and school leadership, and leadership practices can enhance teacher efficacy for inclusive practices. Therefore, building a supportive school climate and incentive mechanism is essential to retain professional teachers and improve teaching quality.

7.4. Building an Inclusive Campus Culture and Strengthening Home-School-Community Collaboration

To address cognitive bias and insufficient inclusive atmosphere, schools must move beyond merely placing students with disabilities in regular classes. They should build a regular mechanism for inclusive campus culture, provide anti-bullying and peer-acceptance education, and promote positive peer relationships. Research on rural Chinese schools has shown that rejection, low belonging, and bullying can seriously harm students with disabilities. Therefore, inclusive climate construction should be treated as a core part of school development. School leaders should adopt transformational and distributed leadership practices that support inclusive education and improve teacher efficacy. At the same time, schools should establish home–school–community collaboration mechanisms, clarify the responsibilities of each educational entity, improve communication, and provide family guidance for home-based rehabilitation and daily behavior support. Only when schools, families, and communities form an effective educational synergy can inclusive education move from physical inclusion to psychological and social integration.

8. Conclusion

This study adopts a critical narrative review, based on various educational policies at all levels, empirical literature, and public educational statistics, to analyze the current situation of inclusive education at the grassroots level. The enrollment coverage rate of disabled students in county-level and township schools is relatively high, but the quality of supporting education is insufficient. There is a gap in implementation between top-level policies and grassroots practices.

The absence of policy implementation details, the lack of evaluation and supervision mechanisms, regional resource allocation imbalance, insufficient professional teaching ability of special education teachers, and lagging campus inclusive education culture all jointly hinder the institutionalization of inclusive education at the grassroots level. The four conditions of institutional operation, resource guarantee, teacher training, and home-school collaboration

directly affect the implementation effect of inclusive education. Most grassroots schools are unable to continuously provide individualized teaching, rehabilitation intervention, and psychological support, and the quality guarantee defects restrict the realization of the goal of special education fairness.

The study integrates policy and literature materials, incorporates various constraints into the same analytical framework, and constructs an optimized system for inclusive education at grassroots schools, providing reference for practical work in county-level and township schools. This study conducts a critical narrative review based on secondary data. The existing empirical samples have insufficient coverage of the local area and are unable to reflect the regional differences in inclusive education in China. Future research can expand the survey scope, increase samples, conduct stratified surveys by region and school type, improve the implementation path of inclusive education at the grassroots level, and promote special education to shift from scale expansion to high-quality, connotative development.

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