

Problems And Countermeasures in The Development of Preschool Integrated Education in China

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Abstract. As a research focus and implementation trend in the field of contemporary special education, integrated education has brought new opportunities and challenges for special children and preschool education. At present, integrated education has been popularized in kindergartens all over China. However, due to the lack of understanding of integrated education and special children in kindergartens, preschool teachers, social groups and other groups, the expected results are often unable to be achieved. By reviewing the development process of China's integrated education, reflecting on the educational problems arising therefrom, and combining with other countries' excellent integrated education policies and experience, this study tries to put forward opinions for the development of China's preschool-integrated education. China's preschool-integrated education is faced with the problems of the public's insufficient understanding of special children and integrated education, the lack of special education training for preschool teachers, and the unsatisfactory effect of integrated education. In order to improve the above situation, the quality of preschool-integrated education can be improved by referring to the experience of British and American integrated education, from the following four aspects: building relevant services and facilities in kindergartens, increasing the employment and training of staff with special educational background, establishing more specific evaluation mechanism and strengthening social support.

Keywords: Integrated education; preschool education; exceptional children.

1. Introduction

Integrated education is an educational concept proposed since the 1960s, which emphasizes that all children have the right to study in ordinary schools. It is also the research focus and development trend in the field of special education in the world today. Based on the experience of integrated education in the world and the present situation of preschool education in China, preschool-integrated education in China is developing and exploring a suitable mode of integrated education. After decades of exploration and development, China's preschool-integrated education has made great achievements and progress. The urgent problem to be solved has changed from improving the enrollment rate of special children receiving integrated education to improving the education quality of all preschool children under the background of integrated education. In the process of guiding special children back to mass education, a large number of deficiencies and problems in traditional preschool education have been found. The purpose of this study is to review the development history of China's integrated education, analyze the existing problems in the current preschool-integrated education, and combine the excellent experience of preschool-integrated education in other countries, try to put forward reflection and suggestions for the improvement of preschool integrated education in China, hoping to provide some ideas for its high-quality development.

2. Integrated Education in China

2.1. The Development History and Achievements

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's integrated education system has gradually improved, and special children's rights and interests have been protected at the legislative and educational levels. It can be loosely split into three stages based on the key goals of the development of integrated education over time.

2.1.1 Preparatory stage

From 1949 to 1988, China's Ministry of Education focused on restoring and rebuilding special education schools, setting educational tasks and goals for special children, and ensuring the basic protection of their educational rights through legislation [1].

In terms of legislation, in 1951, the Ministry of Education issued the *Decision to Reform the Education*, which stipulated that all groups with physical defects should receive education, establishing the legal status of special education in the national education system for the first time. In 1986, the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* was promulgated, which explicitly proposed that the education placement places for special children should be extended to "special education classes" in ordinary schools. Since then, special education has been included in the category of compulsory education, which provides conditions for the construction of integrated education in the future.

Independent special education administration institutions were created to ensure the implementation of relevant education laws in terms of education administration and financial resources [1]. The Ministry of Education established the Department of Education for the Blind, Deaf and Mute in 1953 and the Department of Special Education in 1980. Since 1988, when the China Disabled Persons' Federation was founded, work related to special groups has been separated from civil affairs departments and managed independently by the China Disabled Persons' Federation.

According to statistics, in 1948 there were 42 special education schools in China with 2,380 students. By 1988, the number of special schools had increased to 577, with 57,617 students [2]. During this time, special education has developed and advanced.

2.1.2 Formative stage

From 1989 to 2013, China's Ministry of Education began to promote "Learning in regular classroom". This was the beginning of China's formal attempt to integrated education.

China issued its first administrative regulation on special education, *The Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities*, in 1994. It mandated that general preschool education schools provide preschool special education. In the same year, the Ministry of Education released the *Trial Measures on Carrying out the Work of Disabled Children and Adolescents Attending Classes*. By issuing these decrees, the Ministry of Education has shown the public that it is trying to develop integrated preschool education [3].

In 2009, China's Ministry of Education and other eight departments jointly issued the *Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)*, marking the beginning of the integrated development of special education and mass education in China [4]. To ensure the quality of integrated education, the Ministry of Education issued *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Special Education Teachers* in 2012, with the goal of enhancing special education knowledge reserves and teacher professional levels in three areas: assessment, training of integrated education teachers, and increasing rehabilitation professionals.

2.1.3 Optimization stage

After decades of development, China's integrated education has entered a new stage. Since 2014, the goal of building integrated education has been moving in the direction of higher quality.

In 2014, China's Ministry of Education and seven other agencies announced the *Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016)*, which for the first time expressly suggested promoting all-around inclusive education. China updated the *Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities* in 2017 and released the *Second Special Education Promotion Plan (2017-2020)*. Both rules expressly encourage general kindergartens to establish conditions for exceptional children to enroll. The State Council issued the *Program for the Development of Chinese Children (2021-2023)* in 2021, which outlined further requirements for the complete development of integrated education and the development of preschool education for children with special needs.

According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education, 808,800 school students in China are receiving special education in 2020 [5]. Among them, 435,800 students, or 49.47 percent of students in special education, are receiving integrated education [5].

2.2. The Problems of Integrated Education in Preschool Education

2.2.1 Parents and preschool teachers have insufficient understanding and acceptance of integrated education and exceptional children

For preschool teachers, the concept of preschool-integrated education plays an important role in guiding and inspiring educational practices. In a sample survey, among the kindergartens that enroll special children and carry out integrated education, the number of kindergartens that incorporate integrated education into the concept of kindergarten management is less than 60% of the total sample [6]. Among them, 11.2% of kindergarten teachers do not understand the concept of integrated education or do not adjust their schedules and work according to the concept of integrated education [6]. This reflects the inadequate guidance of preschool-integrated education concepts for daily kindergarten teaching. Although preschool educators can reach a consensus on the idea that "children with special needs should be placed in regular classes and educated with other children", the work of preschool integration education is still passive and at a loss. Preschool teachers generally do not know how to design daily teaching according to the concept of preschool integration education.

Another survey of integrated kindergarten teachers in Shanghai shows that teachers have some understanding of special children but not high acceptance of them, and have little understanding of integrated education [7]. Preschool teachers have certain cognitive difficulties when facing different groups of students, and it is difficult to adapt to the identity of special education teachers. In the practice of education, preschool teachers often form their own ideas and behavior patterns [8]. As a new thing, integrated education brings more cognitive conflicts for teachers [8]. This makes it difficult for them to effectively adjust their cognition and education methods in a short time, resulting in the educational effect and acceptance of children with special needs cannot reach the expectation.

In a survey conducted in Hainan Province, opposition from parents of ordinary children ranked third among the factors that teachers worry about integrated kindergarten education [9]. Parents generally do not know about integrated education, and as stakeholders of integrated education, their cognition can directly affect the promotion process of integrated education. In the interview, some parents said that "integrated education may not be effective for special children, and the effect of receiving treatment in hospital is better", and there is widespread prejudice against special children among parents, believing that special children will spread some diseases to other children [9].

2.2.2 Preschool teachers lack special education knowledge and training

Preschool-integrated education puts forward higher requirements for teachers, and requires teachers to have rich professional knowledge and educational experience [10]. In order to cultivate suitable teachers, more detailed teaching guidance and professional training are needed. At present, most kindergarten teachers are graduates of preschool education majors, lack knowledge and ability related to special education, and lack the ability of integrated education.

In the professional curriculum setup accepted by preschool teachers, the courses about integrated education concepts and knowledge account for a relatively high proportion, but the proportion of skills and practical operation courses is relatively low. In terms of teachers, preschool education is still dominated by preschool education teachers, and there are few special education teachers, and there is a lack of front-line workers with practical experience in special education such as special rehabilitation therapists to give guidance [11]. Preschool teachers generally lack the practice and practical operation opportunities to carry out integrated education at the pre-service training stage, and because the practice training link provided by the school is still dominated by observation and probation in ordinary kindergartens, especially for the newly recruited preschool teachers, their ability and knowledge reserve are not up to the task of integrated education.

2.2.3 The performance of integrated education has fallen short of expectations

First of all, the frequency and quality of teacher-student interaction between preschool teachers and exceptional children need to be improved, and preschool teachers fail to guide children with special needs and their peers to communicate with each other, which leads to exceptional children being more easily ignored and isolated in class.

According to the survey, there are 17.2% of special children in kindergartens in China with developmental defects and 14.7% of children with possible developmental defects whose behaviors and activities are ignored by teachers [12]. Preschool-integrated education has high requirements on teachers, who need to adopt specific teaching skills to ensure the effectiveness of interaction with special children. However, most preschool teachers in China lack special communication methods at present. At the same time, the behavior of special children is generally characterized by disobeying rules, being silent, breaking order and offending others through language and body movements [13]. In teaching activities, conflicts between special children and ordinary children often break out and interrupt the teaching progress [8]. Preschool teachers are difficult to coordinate the relationship between different groups and lack effective measures to guide special children. In such a dilemma, ignoring the behavior of exceptional children or limiting their interaction with other peers becomes a quick solution.

Secondly, although the integrated education environment provides a large number of opportunities for communication and interaction between special children and ordinary students, some special children are easy to alienate or even bully due to problems such as social communication barriers, cognitive backwardness and repeated behaviors, which goes against the original intention of integrated education [14]. Taking autistic children as an example, studies have pointed out that they are more likely to experience verbal bullying and relational bullying in their academic life, which are mainly manifested as exclusion, discrimination and labeling [15]. In the author's personal internship experience, some children with special needs were isolated and rarely noticed and did not socialize because teachers could not pay enough attention to the children with special needs and the children did not know how to get along with them. As a result, not only do they fail to recover and develop in the areas they need, but their mental health worsens.

3. Integrated Education in Britain and the United States

3.1. Integrated Education in Britain

3.1.1 The main policy of integrated education in Britain

Britain's integrated education recognizes the idea of "returning special children to the mainstream" and advocates that special child should receive the same education as ordinary children, instead of being placed in special schools [16].

The *1978 Warnack Report* was the first comprehensive discussion of special education in England. In terms of placement, the report advises that the traditional method of putting special children be adjusted so that they can obtain the special education they require within a particular time frame, and special education content and resource centers should be set up in ordinary schools. The *Education Act 1981* regulates the assessment of exceptional children, the involvement of parents and the responsibilities of local education boards, which are required to ensure, as far as possible, that exceptional children are enrolled in ordinary schools. In 1993, the British government added to the *Education Act 1981* provisions on special educational needs courts, parental choice of school and pupil assessment. In 2001, the British government enacted the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*, which states that disabled children should receive the same care as healthy children, otherwise it is an offense. The *2004 Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act* requires the establishment of a national Special Education Commission and defines the functions of the commission.

Britain's integrated education shows the integration of exceptional children and ordinary children. Exceptional children are able to develop social relationships with their peers and have the right role models, while ordinary students are able to learn in a complete and inclusive environment [16]. This enables all children to have a sense of belonging and contribute their different talents and talents, helping to eliminate prejudice against special groups.

3.1.2 Problems with integrated education in Britain

There are three main problems with an integrated education in Britain.

Firstly, the biggest problem of integrated education is that not all students are suitable for learning in the integrated education environment, especially for special children who are in urgent need of medical assistance and special children who are more destructive. The primary goal for exceptional children remains rehabilitation, and if one student is so disruptive that it severely disrupts the teaching process, the learning standards for all others will be lowered.

Secondly, the school does not provide special education services to special students, such as speech therapy, psychological counseling, special physical education, etc. Garry Hornby believes that if special needs student keeps trying to fit in with general education, they are likely to lose one-on-one special needs time [17]. However, special needs children need to understand the knowledge and skills they lack.

Thirdly, the difficulty for special children to form friendships with their peers is also a problem that cannot be ignored. In the background of integrated education, due to the "difference" of special children, ordinary students do not understand them and think that they do not fit in, which leads to exclusion and school violence [16]. According to statistics, taking autistic students as an example, the proportion of autistic children bullied in private special schools and private ordinary schools was 18% and 28% respectively. The rates of bullying among autistic students in special education schools and public schools were 30 percent and 43 percent, respectively [18].

3.2. Integrated Education in the United States

Integrated education in the United States is mainly reflected in three aspects: first, the inclusive education environment is designed to ensure that special children can participate in the education environment; secondly, special children have the right to participate in all daily teaching activities, and can be equipped with personalized equipment, assistant teachers, technology and so on if necessary; thirdly, there is social support. Schools, social groups, communities and other groups can provide professional services for free or for a fee.

Major policies for integrated education in the United States include *Education for All Children with Disabilities Act of 1975*, *Education for Children with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1986*, *Education for Children with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1990*, *Education for Children with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997*, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*, and *2015 Every Student Succeeds Act*. These policies embody two main policy objectives: first, ensure the humanistic orientation of integrated education; second, provide clear benefits and assistance to people with special needs [19].

Take the *Disability Education Act of 1990* as an example, it replaced "disabled children" with "individuals with disabilities". This change in designation was not a rhetorical change in semantics, but an important conceptual change [20]. The title of the bill first describes the individual and then uses "disabled" as attributive, reflecting the change of the attitude towards special groups to humanism, instead of being confined to the thinking frame of disability and disability, and paying attention to people with special needs from a more humane perspective. *The Education for Children with Disabilities Act of 1986* was amended to raise the benefit age for disabled children, broaden the service group, boost the development of family service spaces, and improve the basic quality of life for children with special needs. *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* and the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* both imposed stricter requirements on public schools in order to boost the education of students with disabilities. In addition, the *Every Student Succeeds Act*

emphasized the guarantee of the right to education and employment for special students, and effectively provided more extensive help for special students.

4. Suggestions on Promoting Preschool-integrated Education in China

4.1. Kindergarten-related Service Improvement and Facility Construction

For special children with needs, the help they need and the severity of the barriers vary. At present, traditional kindergartens have not built enough facilities and set up a perfect service system to meet the needs of different special children. The research shows that the frequency of special education-related services in kindergartens, the cooperation between relevant professionals and special childcare personnel, and the communication with special children's families are not high frequency and insufficient services [4]. The key to ensuring the effective implementation of preschool-integrated education is to provide a variety of professional rehabilitation guidance services for special children, and to provide personalized and appropriate guidance for them to better integrate into general teaching. Kindergartens need to improve the relevant service system for special children, ensure good recovery and education effects for special children from physical recovery, mental and behavioral counseling, and help them truly integrate into the general preschool education environment.

Aiming to guarantee the integration of special children into the general preschool education environment, it is urgent to increase the auxiliary facilities of kindergarten. However, according to statistics, the facilities of integrated preschool kindergartens in China are not barrier-free for children with special needs, and there are still some kindergartens with facilities that are not suitable for children with special needs (32.25%) or that are restricted by educational staff (47.63%) [4]. Kindergartens should be responsible for creating sound resource classrooms, assistance centers, and auxiliary facilities in order to satisfy the individual needs of special children.

4.2. Increase the Recruitment of Special Education Professional Staff and Improve Preschool Teacher Training Content

In China's integrated education kindergartens, special education professionals do not play their due guiding role. Integrated education requires the integration of multiple resources, not only the construction of resource classrooms and help centers, but also the participation of teachers with special education backgrounds, rehabilitation physicians and social workers [21]. At present, in the allocation of kindergarten teachers, the low teacher-student ratio and the lack of special education teachers make it difficult for preschool teachers to give adequate attention to special children. Therefore, adding teachers with special education backgrounds to kindergarten class management can share the educational pressure of other teachers and play a role of demonstration and guidance.

On the other hand, training courses on integrated education and special education should be increased for preschool teachers and students majoring in preschool education. China has not yet formed a systematic teacher training system for preschool-integrated education, and there are few specialized courses on special education. In order to adapt to the environment of integrated education, preschool teachers need to keep learning and exchanging experiences in their careers [11]. Kindergartens should formulate corresponding integrated education training activities according to the practical dilemma of integrated education in kindergartens, and provide special education courses and regular experience exchange meetings for preschool teachers and employees, so as to improve the professional level and coping experience of employees.

4.3. Establish More Specific Assessment Mechanisms for Exceptional Children

By establishing the evaluation and guidance mechanism for special children, relevant departments and kindergartens can visualize and record the state and growth changes of children, which is conducive to the communication between teachers and school and the adjustment of teaching plans [8].

At present, special children lack a more quantitative assessment record system to measure their suitability for regular kindergarten and demonstrate their recovery. And because of the disconnect between medical assessment, rehabilitation services and the education system, most children's assessment records are not needed because of the neglect of regular follow-up of special children [21]. In order to solve this situation, the Ministry of Education can refer to the IEP and IFSP assessment system implemented in the United States to make the situation of special children as specific and visual as possible, and help preschool teachers and families to improve the living and educational environment of special children.

4.4. More Social Support and Understanding

Kindergartens are the main places to implement preschool-integrated education. Strengthening the support of preschool-integrated education kindergartens from the aspects of policies and funds is the premise of guaranteeing the development of preschool-integrated education [22]. The government and education administration departments should strengthen the management of preschool-integrated education institutions and guide kindergartens to cooperate with local special education institutions. More specific and enforceable laws and regulations need to be formulated and promulgated [21]. Using the Ministry of Education's *14th five-year Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education* as an example, it emphasizes the importance of special education expertise and financial resources, and supports the development of preschool-integrated education in terms of personnel training and material resources by formulating specific training programs and increasing financial allocations.

As the public's understanding of special children's groups and integrated education is still insufficient, it is easy to appear prejudiced against the two. The government and social groups need to strengthen publicity and science popularization to break discrimination. At present, the publicity of special children's groups and integrated education is mostly limited to the traditional activities of setting up publicity festivals and organizing voluntary services. These publicity methods have fallen behind the times and cannot effectively eliminate the estrangement between the masses [21]. In the context of unprecedented communication efficiency achieved by short videos and new media, integrated education promotion needs to make use of their publicity ability to bring relevant knowledge and auxiliary tools to the public through popular science videos, special education applications and other means.

Social groups also need to be more widely mobilized and supported to actively participate in the process of integration education. In view of the shortage of preschool teacher resources in China, more therapists, social workers and volunteers can be cultivated by referring to the service model of professional assistant for community-integrated education [8].

5. Conclusion

In decades of development, the concept and model of preschool-integrated education in China have been greatly perfected and improved. However, there are still a lot of problems that need to be solved, such as insufficient cognition of all social groups to integrate education and special children, lack of special education background and training of preschool teachers, and easy isolation and neglect of special children.

After analyzing and referring to the British and American policies and legislation on integrated education and the ways of education implementation, this study puts forward the following feasible methods for reference to solve the defects in China's preschool integrated education and achieve the goal of high-quality education. In terms of kindergarten hardware and service, people should build and improve related auxiliary facilities and support services. In addition, in order to better carry out daily education and teaching activities and make up for the lack of teachers' professional ability, relevant departments and kindergartens need to increase the recruitment of staff with special education backgrounds and standardize the pre-service and post-service training of integrated

education. Aiming to ensure that exceptional children can integrate into the class more smoothly, more specific evaluation mechanisms need to be created to provide educational advice and feedback to the family and school through status assessment and regular follow-up observation. Society's understanding and support for integrated education and special children's groups are also essential. In order to break prejudice and discrimination, publicity and science popularization on new media platforms should be intensified, so that the public is able to maintain an inclusive attitude towards special children's groups.

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