

Chinese inclusive education: enactment, obstacles, and possible paths

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Abstract. As the concept of educational equity gains global prominence, building an inclusive education system has become a key pathway to achieving sustainable development in education. This study analyzes the development, challenges, and future directions of inclusive education in China. It finds that while national policies have expanded educational access for students with disabilities, deep-rooted issues persist. These include regional disparities, social misconceptions, insufficient teacher preparation, and limited access to higher education. As a result, inclusive education in China remains more symbolic than substantive. Based on these findings, this paper proposes the following recommendations: reforming curricula and assessments to support differentiated learning; establishing early transition and career planning services; promoting public awareness to combat prejudice; and strengthening teacher training systems. Only through coordinated reforms in policy, practice, and culture can China realize the full promise of inclusive education.

1 Introduction

As reported in 2019, about 794,600 SEN students attended compulsory education (grades 1-9) in China. Nearly half (49.15%) of these students, predominantly those with mild or moderate disabilities, were educated in regular classrooms. Another 28.87% enrolled in specialized institutions, while the remainder received home-based education due to severe disabilities [1]. The "Learning in Regular Classrooms" (LRC) policy, inspired by international frameworks, advocates the inclusion of SEN students in mainstream educational environments. Initially focusing on students with intellectual, hearing, and visual disabilities, recent policy changes have broadened to encompass autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and various learning disabilities [2]. Nonetheless, in practice, LRC frequently emphasizes physical placement rather than genuinely inclusive instructional strategies, thus representing integration rather than true inclusive education [1].

Despite substantial progress, critical challenges remain. This paper critically examines the barriers to inclusive education and explores solutions that hold critical implications for educational equity, social justice, and sustainable human development. Understanding the gaps between policies and practice helps inform effective strategies and promotes successful implementation at all educational levels. China's inclusive education policies highlight four

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primary barriers: regional inequalities, societal misconceptions, inadequate teacher preparation, and restricted higher education access. With a focus on these issues, this study aims to investigate the historical and current context of inclusive education in China, identify key barriers, and propose practical strategies to advance inclusive practices.

2 China's Development in Inclusive Education

2.1 Historical development

The development of inclusive education in China has followed a unique trajectory shaped by its social, political, and economic contexts. Early forms of inclusion emerged informally in the 1950s, when some local schools voluntarily admitted students with disabilities [3]. A more formalized movement began in the 1980s with revisions to the Constitution and the promulgation of the Compulsory Education Law, which emphasized educational rights for students with visual, hearing, and intellectual disabilities [4]. The pivotal moment came with the launch of the "Learning in Regular Classrooms" (LRC) initiative through the 1986 Golden Key Education Project, which promoted the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream schools [3]. The LRC approach expanded significantly during the 1990s and early 2000s through successive Five-Year Plans and culminated in its formal incorporation into national legislation with the 2006 revision of the Compulsory Education Act and the 2008 Protection of Disabled Persons Law [4]. Although LRC has enhanced access, its focus has often been more on physical placement rather than deep pedagogical inclusion, highlighting ongoing challenges in realizing genuine inclusive education [4]. Over time, national policies increasingly institutionalized the LRC, raising its formal recognition through the 2006 revision of the Compulsory Education Law and the 2008 Protection of Disabled Persons Law. While the LRC has significantly improved school enrollment rates for students with disabilities, it faces persistent challenges, including inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and societal misconceptions, reflecting an ongoing gap between policy ideals and educational practice [3,5].

2.2 Recent policies

Recent years have witnessed significant policy developments aimed at advancing inclusive education in China. Following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008, China committed to protecting the educational rights of students with disabilities [6]. Major national initiatives include the Outline of National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), which explicitly emphasizes improving inclusive education across all educational levels. Additionally, two key Special Education Promotion Plans (2014-2016 and 2017-2020) were launched, aiming to expand access to and enhance the quality of education for students with special educational needs [6].

A milestone was achieved in 2015 when students with disabilities who graduated from special schools were granted the right to take the national college entrance examination (Gao Kao) with appropriate accommodations, significantly improving their access to higher education [6]. Despite these advances, inclusive practices in Chinese universities remain limited, with many institutions lacking sufficient support systems and accessible resources. Teachers' limited knowledge of disability accommodations further hinders effective implementation. Thus, while policy frameworks have progressed, practical challenges continue to restrict the full realization of inclusive education ideals in China.

3 Barriers to Inclusive Education

3.1 Regional disparities

The persistent regional disparities between urban and rural areas have profoundly influenced the trajectory of inclusive education development in China. Under the dual rural-urban system, urban schools typically possess more abundant resources, superior infrastructure, and better-trained teachers compared to their rural counterparts [1].

Based on the Basic Statistics of Special Education (2022), in less economically developed provinces such as Tibet, Qinghai, and Gansu, the number of special schools and student enrollments is declining. Fewer students continue their education as they progress through the system [7]. Rural areas face a shortage of resources, qualified teachers, and tailored teaching methods for students with special educational needs (SEN) [1]. These underdeveloped regions, where many children with disabilities live, often struggle with poor infrastructure and limited resources, making it difficult for children to access the special education services they need [7,8].

This inequality has led to a situation where students with special educational needs (SEN) in rural areas receive substantially less support and encounter greater barriers to effective inclusion. Although national policies, such as the revised Compulsory Education Law of 2006 and subsequent funding guarantees, aimed to promote balanced development, the practical outcomes reveal ongoing disparities, particularly in teaching quality and instructional strategies [9].

Inclusive education efforts, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas, are hindered not only by resource scarcity but also by systemic gaps in teacher training, community support, and policy targeting.

Addressing these challenges requires not only financial investment but also structural reforms that recognize the nuanced realities of regional educational disadvantage and actively prioritize inclusion as a substantive, rather than nominal, objective.

3.2 Social misconceptions and prejudices

Social misconceptions and prejudices have significantly hindered the advancement of inclusive education in China. Despite formal policies promoting inclusion, widespread societal misunderstanding, particularly concerning disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), creates barriers to full acceptance [10]. Many parents of typically developing (TD) children and a substantial proportion of classroom teachers harbor concerns that inclusive education may negatively affect the academic and social development of TD students. This stems partly from misconceptions associating disabilities with behavioral disruptions or violent tendencies [10].

Teachers' apprehensions, shaped by inadequate training and large class sizes, further contribute to an environment where inclusion is superficially achieved but not substantively realized. To progress toward genuinely inclusive education, China must address societal prejudices through public education campaigns, community engagement, and enhanced teacher training aimed at reshaping attitudes and reducing stigma toward students with disabilities.

3.3 Teacher resources and classroom settings

The shortage of qualified teachers and the inadequacy of inclusive classroom settings remain major obstacles to the development of inclusive education in China. Teachers in special and

inclusive education often experience low motivation, insufficient training, and limited professional support, resulting in a gap between inclusive policies and effective practice [11]. Many teachers enter the field through extrinsic motivations such as job security rather than intrinsic commitment, and report limited knowledge about special educational needs (SEN), which undermines their ability to implement inclusive practices meaningfully [11].

Moreover, inclusive classroom environments are frequently reluctant to support students with diverse needs. Teachers are burdened by large class sizes, lack of assistive technologies, and heavy administrative duties intensified by neoliberal reforms emphasizing standardization and performance metrics [12]. Such pressures deprofessionalize teaching, reducing teachers' autonomy and further limiting their capacity to adapt instruction for SEN students. Despite these constraints, some teachers display resilience by proactively seeking resources and support to sustain inclusive practices [12]. Without systematic investment in teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, and adaptive classroom infrastructures, the ambition of achieving genuine inclusive education in China remains largely aspirational rather than realized.

3.4 Access to higher education

Access to higher education for students with disabilities (SwDs) in China has been both a significant milestone and a persistent challenge in the broader development of inclusive education and educational equity. Since the ratification of the CRPD and the introduction of the 2010-2020 National Education Reform Plan, China has made notable efforts to expand higher education opportunities for SwDs [6]. Policy advances, such as allowing SwDs to take the Gao Kao with accommodations from 2015, symbolize crucial progress. However, despite increasing enrollment numbers, profound systemic challenges remain.

Most regular universities still lack structured support systems, accessible environments, and faculty trained in inclusive teaching strategies, limiting SwDs' meaningful participation in academic and social life [6]. Moreover, the focus on admissions and employment often overshadows efforts to ensure academic success and campus inclusion. Without robust institutional support, educational equity remains aspirational rather than achieved. Therefore, to truly fulfill the promise of equitable education for all students in China, improving inclusive higher education requires comprehensive reform, which is not only in access but also in curriculum adaptation, campus accessibility, faculty development, and cultural attitudes.

4 Exploring the Future Pathway

4.1 Curriculum and course design

The study by Yan, Deng, and Ma (2021) suggests that future curriculum and course design for Chinese inclusive education should move beyond survival-focused adaptation towards promoting holistic development, especially academic achievement. Teachers' current prioritization of life skills and behavioral adaptation reflects pragmatic survival strategies but risks marginalizing the educational rights of students with special educational needs (SEN). A future pathway must integrate differentiated curricula that simultaneously support social integration and rigorous academic engagement [2]. This is feasible given China's growing policy support and teachers' awareness of social adaptation needs. However, major challenges remain to be the rigid exam-oriented educational structures, insufficient teacher training on adaptive pedagogies, and a lack of individualized support mechanisms could hinder meaningful curriculum reform. Without a systematic rethinking of curricular goals,

inclusive education risks reinforcing inequalities rather than mitigating them. Therefore, reform must prioritize flexible course frameworks, universal design principles, and professional development aligned with inclusive values. Nevertheless, India's NEP 2020 offers a practical and inspiring pathway for China to create a more genuinely inclusive, responsive, and sustainable education system aligned with 21st-century goals. It outlines a comprehensive reform across all stages of education, emphasizing universal access, equity, and quality by 2040. The policy was developed through a bottom-up process promoting decentralization, including district consultations, stakeholder surveys, and state-level curriculum frameworks [13].

For China, this approach offers several critical inspirations. First, the active engagement of diverse stakeholders in curriculum and policy formation, including teachers, parents, and community members, could address the urban-rural divide and better reflect the educational realities of marginalized communities. Second, China's inclusive education policies could benefit from a flexible, localized curriculum design system, accommodating the varied developmental needs across regions. Finally, embedding inclusive education goals explicitly into national strategic planning, while allowing for state-level adaptation as India does, may help bridge China's policy-practice gaps in inclusive education.

However, implementing such a model in China would require overcoming challenges, including reforming its traditionally centralized education governance, building widespread grassroots consultation mechanisms, and ensuring teacher empowerment to participate meaningfully in policymaking.

4.2 Career and transition services

The study by Zhang et al. (2018) highlights that while China has improved access to higher education for students with disabilities (SwDs), career and transition services remain severely underdeveloped. Current practices largely prioritize admissions and employment outcomes, neglecting the academic and social experiences crucial for sustainable inclusion. Future pathways must embed career planning, campus orientation, and individualized employment support into the university experience for SwDs. Establishing dedicated service centers and transition programs would not only facilitate smoother entry into the workforce but also ensure that inclusive education extends beyond symbolic access to real empowerment. However, universities often lack staff expertise in disability career counseling, and neoliberal performance pressures discourage resource allocation to non-mainstream services. Moreover, entrenched societal prejudices against disability employment limit external opportunities. Thus, creating robust, student-centered transition services is essential but demands structural reform, capacity building, and cultural change across both educational and labor systems [6].

China can draw valuable lessons from Malaysia's approach. Integrating early career planning into inclusive education frameworks could significantly enhance the preparedness of Chinese SEN students for post-school life. Adopting policies that prioritize individualized transition plans, involve families, and align vocational skills with labor market needs would address current gaps between education and employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Nevertheless, challenges such as rigid academic-focused curricula, regional disparities, and societal prejudices would require careful navigation for successful adaptation in the Chinese context. Malaysia, for example, has introduced policies to support the transition of students with special educational needs from school to employment. These focus on early intervention, career-oriented education, and collaboration with families and communities. Transition planning begins in early childhood, emphasizing self-determination, work readiness, and holistic development aligned with workforce needs [14]. This can give good hints for China.

4.3 Societal and cultural movements

Mu et al. highlight how resilient Chinese inclusive education teachers navigate neoliberal structural constraints to sustain professional competence [12]. Their agency-driven resilience reveals a critical pathway for broader societal change that challenges misconceptions and prejudices about students with special needs, requiring active, grassroots-level movements rather than top-down policies alone. Teachers who advocate for inclusive practices within their constrained environments model how public discourses can be shifted. Future pathways must leverage such localized initiatives, promoting teacher empowerment, community engagement, and public education campaigns to dismantle entrenched stigmas. However, challenges remain substantial. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs about disability as personal or familial misfortune, combined with performance-driven schooling cultures, perpetuate exclusionary mindsets. Without systemic investment in public awareness, media representation, and inclusive leadership training, societal prejudice will continue to undermine policy reforms. Building inclusive mindsets demands a slow, sustained cultural shift where educators, families, and policymakers co-construct a vision of diversity as strength rather than deficit.

4.4 Comprehensive teacher training programmes

Teacher attitudes significantly shape the success of inclusive education, yet current training in China inadequately prepares educators to challenge misconceptions about students with special needs [11]. Teachers with prior experience teaching SwDs tend to be more supportive and recognize the benefits of diversity in the classroom, which again stresses the importance of teacher training for inclusive education [15].

Many teachers, particularly in rural areas, hold limited knowledge of special education principles and remain extrinsically motivated, perpetuating stigma rather than fostering inclusion [1]. Future pathways must prioritize embedding disability awareness, anti-stigma education, and inclusive pedagogy deeply into both pre-service and in-service training programs. Such reforms must move beyond technical knowledge to actively reshape teachers' values, empathy, and self-efficacy in working with diverse learners. However, challenges persist: exam-centric schooling cultures, fragmented professional development opportunities, and urban-rural disparities in resources inhibit transformative teacher learning. Without systemic investment in high-quality, culturally responsive teacher education, societal prejudices will continue to undermine policy efforts toward inclusive education. Long-term change requires cultivating teachers as advocates and role models for a genuinely inclusive society.

England's teacher education reform emphasizes preparing future teachers for inclusive practice, embedding inclusion and diversity within both coursework and school placements [16]. However, the policy-driven model largely framed inclusion through narrow lenses--such as ability-group differentiation and superficial multicultural celebrations--often undermining deeper transformative goals. The reliance on performative measures, inspection pressures, and marketized schooling diluted genuine inclusive pedagogy into bureaucratic compliance rather than critical practice. This experience offers valuable lessons for China: future teacher training reforms must avoid treating inclusion as an "add-on" requirement and instead embed it as a foundational educational philosophy. Training should emphasize critical reflection, social justice, and adaptive pedagogy, empowering teachers to challenge structural barriers rather than merely accommodating them. Yet challenges remain: China's exam-centric culture and hierarchical schooling systems may resist such shifts without coordinated reforms in teacher evaluation, school governance, and broader societal attitudes toward disability and diversity.

5 Conclusion

This paper has examined the development, barriers, and future pathways of inclusive education in China. Although policies like the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) initiative and international frameworks such as the CRPD have improved access for students with disabilities, significant challenges remain. These include regional inequalities, social prejudices, inadequate teacher training, and limited access to higher education.

To achieve genuine inclusion, China must go beyond physical placement and ensure meaningful participation for all learners. Reforms in curriculum design should support both academic growth and social development, with flexible teaching strategies tailored to diverse needs. International examples, such as India's bottom-up curriculum reform and Malaysia's early transition planning, offer practical lessons for China's future efforts.

Equally important is changing public attitudes toward disability. Teacher training must be enhanced to address misconceptions and promote empathy. Inclusive education can only thrive when educators are empowered and supported to foster inclusive environments. Cultural shifts—supported by public education campaigns and community engagement—are necessary to challenge deep-rooted stigma.

Ultimately, inclusive education in China requires both systemic reform and cultural transformation. Only through coordinated efforts across policy, practice, and public perception can all students receive the fair and quality education they deserve.

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