

Original Paper

Educational Dilemmas and Challenges for Students with Autism under the Learning in Regular Classroom Policy: A Qualitative Study Based on the Perspectives of Two Parents in Beijing

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Abstract

Learning in Regular Classroom (LRC) is a crucial approach for addressing the educational placement of children with special needs and implementing the philosophy of inclusive education. However, children with autism face significant challenges in inclusive settings due to difficulties in social interaction, communication, and behaviors. This study employs a qualitative research method, interviewing parents of children with autism whose children have completed compulsory education in regular schools in Beijing, to explore the practical challenges of implementing LRC policy the findings reveal conflicts between the ideal and the reality of policy implementation. Families of children with autism encounter challenges related to school placement, adaptation, and support due to incomplete policy regulations, inadequate policy execution, and insufficient educational support. To ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education, a deeper reflection and adjustment of the LRC policy are necessary. This study provides valuable insights from a parental perspective into the challenges faced by children with autism in China under the LRC policy, aiming to inform future policy development and implementation.

Keywords

learning in regular classroom, inclusive education, children with autism, parental perspective

1. Introduction

The term “Learning in regular classroom” (LRC) was first introduced in Chinese national policy in the 1987 document “Notice on Issuing the Teaching Plan for Full-time Schools (Classes) for the Intellectually Disabled (Draft for Comments)” (National Education Commission, n.d.). Initially, it was a supplementary approach to promoting compulsory education for individuals with disabilities. Over time, it has evolved into a preferred form of special education in China. As China’s primary method for adapting to the international trend of inclusive education, LRC is the most locally characteristic manifestation of inclusive education models (Guo, & Deng, 2021). According to the “Survey Report on the Family Status, Needs, and Support Resources for Individuals with Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders in China” (China Autism Family Status Social Survey Project Team, 2023), 45.5% of children with autism are currently receiving inclusive education in regular schools.

Currently, inclusive education is undergoing a critical transition from quantitative expansion to qualitative improvement in China. The 2017 revision of the “Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities” emphasized the need to improve the quality of education for individuals with disabilities and actively promote inclusive education. In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the “Guidance on Strengthening Inclusive Education for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities during Compulsory Education”. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China underscored the commitment to enhancing the quality of inclusive education, highlighting the need to strengthen the management of inclusive education for school-age children and adolescents with disabilities. Beijing has pioneered the implementation of a dual enrollment system for special education school students, facilitating transitions between regular and special schools based on student needs (Central Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2023).

However, children with autism face challenges in social interaction, communication, and behavior patterns within inclusive education settings. Compared to their peers, children with autism often struggle to meet the behavioral and cognitive standards of regular classrooms, resulting in poor classroom participation and impacting their academic and overall development (Yang, 2019). In terms of social interactions, autistic students often exhibit lower levels of social behavior and higher levels of aggression and sensitivity, leading to their neglect and rejection by peers in inclusive settings (Zhang, & Lian, 2020). Unlike the broadly implemented inclusive education in international contexts, China’s inclusive education emphasizes the specific placement of special needs students in regular schools. Nevertheless, as the practice of LRC has evolved in response to international trends rather than domestic special education needs, there remain policy and practice discrepancies. These are evidenced by issues such as underdeveloped working mechanisms, inadequate support conditions, and insufficient special education expertise among regular classroom teachers (Ministry of Education, 2020). These factors limit the effective inclusion of autistic students and impact the overall quality of inclusive education (Ma, 2019). The phenomenon of children with autism returning from regular schools to

special education schools (Guan, Liu, & Li, 2022) is particularly prominent, presenting significant challenges to inclusive education.

Previous research (Wei & Mou, 2017; Pan, 2019) has primarily focused on the inclusive education experiences of autistic students at specific educational stages (preschool, primary school, or middle school), lacking longitudinal studies across these stages. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research examining the experiences and perceptions of parents of autistic students across different educational stages (Su, Guo, & Wang, 2018). (Gómez-Mar í T árraga-M ínuez, & Pastor-Cerezuela, 2022; Su, Wu, & Fang, 2014) Parents of autistic students are direct recipients of inclusive education services, and their experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and evaluations are crucial for improving the quality of inclusive education. This study focuses on the experiences of two mothers of autistic students whose children have completed compulsory education in regular educational institutions in Beijing. The basic information of the study participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Study Participants

Participant ID	Relationship to Student	Occupation	Family Situation	Degree of Disability	Educational Placement Experience
001-F	Mother	Kindergarten Teacher	Family of three: Husband (mental health condition) and son (autism)	Mild	Regular Kindergarten, Regular Primary School, Regular Middle School, Regular High School
002-F	Mother	Special Education Teacher	Family of three: Husband (teacher) and son (autism)	Moderate	Regular Kindergarten, Regular Primary School, Private Confucian Academy, Vocational High School (Special Education)

2. Research Design

2.1 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a double hermeneutic process. Initially, participants' experiences are interpreted and understood through in-depth interviews, and then further interpreted and analyzed by the researchers (Liu, 2019). In-depth interviews, a primary method in qualitative research, generate substantial textual data through comprehensive conversations with respondents. These interviews provide rich material for understanding the lifestyles and life experiences of a particular social group, exploring the formation of specific social phenomena, and proposing solutions to social problems. In this study, qualitative research methods were used to conduct interviews with the parents of two children with autism, with the assistance of Nvivo 12 software for coding and analysis. Nvivo software was used to import Chinese interview transcripts, index, search, and theorize non-numeric data, thereby enhancing the efficiency of the researcher's statistical analysis. The study aims to analyze the effectiveness and impact of inclusive education policies, exploring the educational challenges and difficulties faced by children with autism in the context of the continuous implementation of these policies.

2.2 Procedure

2.2.1 Data Collection Method

This study employed a mixed sampling method, combining convenience sampling with purposive sampling to select participants. Initially, the interviewees were targeted as parents of students with autism whose children had completed compulsory education in regular school. Based on previous interactions with parents of autistic students and relevant resources, the researcher selected Parent A as the first interviewee using the principle of convenience. After completing the interview with Parent A, Parent B was selected as the second participant through purposive sampling. This choice was also informed by Parent B's public statements on platforms, which aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring data saturation.

The primary method of data collection was through interviews. After the parents were fully informed about the study's purpose, content, and use, and provided their informed consent, the interviews were conducted. The interview content focused primarily on basic information and the experiences of students with autism in inclusive education at different educational stages. The interviews were recorded using audio equipment. The interview with Parent A lasted 115 minutes, producing an original transcript of approximately 28,054 words. Parent B's interview was conducted in a live broadcast format. As a certified BCBA (Behavior Analyst), she interacted in real-time with parents of children with autism across the country during a live session on January 13, which attracted 6,689 viewers and lasted 150 minutes, generating 31,137 words of content. Additionally, Parent B conducted a complete interview titled "B: 12 Years of Autism from Regular Elementary to High School", released on March

14, 2023, containing 10,125 words. In total, the researcher compiled all interview content and recordings, resulting in a comprehensive interview transcript of 69,316 words.

2.2.2 Data Organization and Analysis

After each interview, the researcher transcribed and organized the collected data. Prior to formal analysis, the recorded audio was carefully reviewed and listened to again to ensure that the full context of participants' responses was considered.

This study utilized Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological data analysis process, combined with taxonomic analysis and situational analysis methods. The analysis began with a thorough examination of each interview transcript to identify meanings and experiential themes. In taxonomic analysis, data with similar attributes were categorized under the same class and given conceptual labels. Situational analysis involved understanding the specific context to identify indigenous concepts used by the participants, allowing for a comprehensive and detailed depiction of the participants' dynamic processes in specific situations. This approach enabled an interpretative understanding of the participants' personal experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them.

2.2.3 Coding Method

① A new case was created, and the relevant interview transcripts were imported into Nvivo 12 software. ② The interview transcripts were then coded and analyzed. This involved assigning codes to the interview data, integrating pre-established sub-nodes, and marking multiple nodes within a single segment of material. When new conceptual categories emerged and could not be immediately classified, they were labeled as free nodes; otherwise, they were marked under a specific sub-node. ③ After initial coding was completed, the software was used to regroup and merge multiple nodes. During this process, all content under each node was extracted, and node names were appropriately revised.

2.2.4 Coding Examples

Open coding and axial coding are critical steps in conceptualizing and categorizing the original interview data. Open coding involves breaking down and reassembling abstracted concepts from the interview records, organizing and synthesizing them in new ways, and assigning them new concepts and categories. During open coding, the original interview data are analyzed line by line to perform initial conceptualization.

To better construct the main categories, axial coding is employed, along with cluster analysis, to analyze the fragmented content from the open coding process. By linking relationships between different categories, more generalized categories are formed. The initial categories are then systematically organized according to their relationships and logical order, resulting in four main categories and their corresponding subcategories: School Placement (Enrollment Challenges, Parental Concerns); school Adjustment (Transition Preparation, Academic Challenges, Social Isolation); School Support (Challenges for Educators, Resource Constraints); policy Implementation (Information Barriers, Ideal vs. Reality). (See Table 2 for a partial example of the three-level coding related to the

educational challenges of children with autism in mainstream schools.

Table 2. Three-Level Coding of Educational Challenges for Children with Autism in Mainstream Schools (Partial)

Category	Subcategory	Original Statement
School Placement	Enrollment Challenges	“There was some drama during enrollment (the homeroom teacher was unwilling to accept my child), but that issue was resolved. I still feel very grateful to the principal—without her support, the other teachers wouldn’t have treated my child so well. Because the principal showed such concern, the other teachers followed suit”.
	Parental Concerns	“I felt like I was on the verge of a breakdown, almost mentally ill, somewhat depressed. It was like an invisible pressure that I couldn’t shake off. When I was with my child, I just couldn’t adjust, and the pressure I put on myself was overwhelming”.
School Adjustment	Transition Preparation	“If we are aiming for inclusion in mainstream education, the child at least needs to have some basic skills, like reading, writing, and arithmetic. He may struggle with difficult tasks, but he should at least be able to do basic math and write words from pinyin. That’s why we insist that children have basic abilities before integrating them into mainstream schools. They must at least know how to read, write, and do basic math”.
	Academic Challenges	“By third grade, he couldn’t keep up with the academics. Most of our special needs kids really can’t keep up academically”.
School Support	Social Isolation	“He doesn’t get along well with the other kids in class. It seems like, as a child with autism, he just doesn’t like being in noisy, crowded situations”.
	Challenges for	“But when it comes to individualized support for

Category	Subcategory	Original Statement
	Educators	children like F, there is no IEP”.
	Resource Constraints	“The resource room is practically abandoned. These children are allocated a significant budget, and there’s a resource room and a sandplay classroom, but they’re always locked. We had a psychological counselor and some teachers at the beginning, but they were never available to us. The equipment is there, but it’s never been used”.
Policy Implementation	Information Barriers	“It feels like the government isn’t doing much. I usually get policy information from Teacher L, who shares it with me. Sometimes I ask the relevant government personnel if the policy exists, and they tell me to wait for the notice, but getting information often requires negotiation from both sides”.
	<i>Ideal</i> vs. <i>Reality</i>	<i>“The principal’s support made it easier for my child to enter the school and start inclusive education. At the time, the principal suggested we try it out for two weeks, and if it didn’t work, we’d move to a special school”.</i>

3. Research Findings

3.1 School Placement

3.1.1 Challenges in School Placement

When deciding on an educational setting, parents of school-age children with autism often face two primary constraints: the proximity of the school and their assessment of their child’s developmental abilities. Two participants in this study made the decision to enroll their children in mainstream classrooms based on their observations of the children’s early cognitive, memory, and language abilities. This decision-making process was primarily driven by the parents, with other family members (especially grandparents) providing emotional and resource support. It was a multi-faceted decision-making process, involving a complex interplay of emotions and practical considerations.

“As for his abilities, how can I put it? He’s quite capable, yet not outstanding. At that time, I had high hopes, unlike now when I’m more realistic. Back then, I was certain he’d go to college—he’s so smart. It was all so ideal in my mind, because he was doing better than other children with autism. He was

good at learning, had an excellent memory. For example, in English, his classmates would ask him for answers because he knew them all. He had a remarkable memory. Even when the teacher played a video, he wouldn't need to watch it closely—his hearing was exceptional. After listening to an English cartoon a few times, while others were still reading it, he had already memorized it. The same with studying Chinese classics; he memorized the *Analects of Confucius* too". (001-F)

"He started talking at the same time as typical children, maybe even earlier. In fact, among children like ours, he's probably in the top 10 or 20 percent". (002-F)

After selecting the type of school, parents faced the challenge of ensuring their child's acceptance into a mainstream school. The interviews revealed that both parents chose to be upfront about their child's condition, allowing the school to make the final decision. However, their experiences differed significantly.

One parent received support from the school principal, despite initial resistance from the classroom teacher, leading to a successful school placement: "At first, his teacher didn't want to accept him and wanted to transfer him to another class. I had to appeal to the principal, who eventually resolved the issue. The other teachers were actually quite kind. I'm still very grateful to the principal; without her support, the other teachers wouldn't have treated my child so well. The principal's support made a big difference—seeing how the leadership valued my child, the subject teachers were also accommodating, and he integrated pretty well". (001-F)

The other parent, however, faced verbal humiliation from the school admission officer and had to rely on personal connections to secure a suitable placement for their child: "Back in 2011, elementary schools in Beijing still conducted interviews. During the interview, the vice principal and a teacher told me they had never seen a child like mine and said he wasn't fit for their school. One male teacher even asked if my child needed to see a doctor or take medication. They told me that inclusive education was only for children from the local district, and my child didn't qualify. We ended up seeking out other schools, using personal connections to find one with a resource room. The principal there suggested we try it out for two weeks, and if it didn't work, we could consider a special school". (002-F)

3.1.2 Parental Reflections

After overcoming various obstacles, as students with autism gain the right and opportunity to study in regular schools, parents begin to nurture aspirations and expectations for their child's achievements in mainstream schools. Parents hold a mix of simple hopes and internal conflicts regarding what they wish their child to achieve in regular education. On one hand, parents have realistic expectations based on their children's capabilities; on the other hand, they may harbor the desire for their children to perform like their neurotypical peers, influenced by the mainstream school environment. The following dialogue between a mother and her child illustrates this inner conflict vividly:

"Mom, you forced me to go to that mainstream school when I was in sixth grade".

"I believed that, with your abilities, you could overcome the challenges. I had faith in your capability to

handle it. Every process has its difficulties—nothing is ever easy or pleasant, and things don't just get resolved without effort. But after assessing the situation, we tried our best to find ways to persist through it". (002-F)

The emotional impact on parents is both extensive and profound. From the initial diagnosis to receiving appropriate rehabilitation and ongoing educational support, parents of children with autism, alongside their children, engage in what feels like an endless marathon against other parents of neurotypical children, often leaving them physically and mentally exhausted. They face pressures both internally and externally, frequently falling into the mire of anxiety and self-blame:

"I felt like I was on the verge of a breakdown, almost as if I was losing my mind—like I was becoming depressed. The invisible pressure I placed on myself became unbearable. When you're taking care of your child, their emotions affect you. I kept putting too much pressure on myself, setting high and strict expectations for my child. I just wanted him to keep up with his classmates, whether academically or in terms of social integration". (001-F)

Parents also grow through these challenges, gradually coming to terms with reality, learning to manage stress, and seeking methods for self-relief and personal growth: "I don't think I ever really adjusted until recently. The pressure just never seemed to go away, unlike now, where I've finally let go of a lot of it". (001-F)

"Looking back, I was so overwhelmed at that time that I wished for suicide. But later on, I found ways to cope, like exercising and getting more sleep. When I turned 40, I even started studying for the BCBA exam and eventually passed. Now, my husband and I tutor our child ourselves". (002-F)

To ensure their children's smoother integration into mainstream schools, parents of autistic children often have to engage in extensive communication and coordination with school staff, teachers, students, and other parents.

"In addition to being my child's mother, I also take on additional roles such as assisting teachers, acting as a liaison with other students' parents, and promoting awareness about our children's needs". (001-F)

Given the large class sizes in Chinese schools, parents sometimes find it necessary to maintain relationships with teachers to ensure their child receives adequate attention and care.

"My child's kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school teachers—we're still in touch. I still reach out to them during the holidays". (002-F)

3.2 School Adaptation

3.2.1 Transition Preparation

To facilitate their child's integration into mainstream education, both parents were highly attentive to the prerequisite skills necessary for entering a regular school. They emphasized the importance of transitional education, including self-care abilities, behavioral norms, emotional stability, and adaptation to a group environment. These skills were seen as essential for better adjustment and integration within the school setting. However, the parents' expectations regarding support from the

school were relatively low. During the interviews, it was commonly expressed that the primary responsibility for the child's successful integration lies with the child and the family. The parents were inclined to rely on early preparation and training to ensure the child's readiness for mainstream education, while maintaining a rather passive attitude towards the support and assistance provided by the school.

"For example, we chose a school focused on traditional culture to teach our child basic principles of life, simplicity, and moral values. The curriculum included cognitive training and exposure to classical texts. This environment helped stabilize their emotions, allowing them to calm their minds and prevent restlessness". (001-F)

"Our child barely managed to get through school. In hindsight, delaying entry by a year and enrolling in a transition program would have been beneficial, providing a year for psychological maturity. If we had known about such institutions at that time, we would have chosen that option to better prepare our child". (002-F)

"When it comes to mainstream integration, our child needs to possess at least basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. They don't need to master difficult concepts, but they should be able to perform simple calculations and read and write basic words". (002-F)

"Parents usually endure a certain period during which they must adjust their child's behavior. This period is crucial as it represents a window of opportunity for making necessary adjustments. If you missed the chance, and tensions arise with other parents, the situation could become difficult to manage. It is essential for parents to collaborate with the school to address any problematic behaviors that might hinder the child's integration, especially those that impact others". (002-F)

3.2.2 Academic Challenges

Despite the aspirations that parents of autistic students hold for their children's education, the gap between these ideals and reality often proves insurmountable. The harsh realities of life relentlessly shatter these expectations, manifesting in every aspect of the students' school experiences. Academic achievement, a key indicator of the quality of inclusive education, encompasses both learning outcomes and participation. In this study, two autistic students who received inclusive education at different stages exhibited a pattern in their academic performance that transitioned from "no significant difference compared to typical children" to "gradually falling behind" and eventually "failing to adapt", thus becoming outsiders within the inclusive education system.

During the preschool years, autistic children who participated in inclusive education did not show significant differences compared to their peers. "Kindergarten was great; for him, he was so happy with the inclusion because it was mostly play and activities" (001F). However, in elementary school, as the grades progressed, the academic performance of these students began to decline. This was mainly reflected in poor academic outcomes. "You know, by the time he reached fourth or fifth grade, his comprehension ability... he couldn't keep up. The lessons were all about group discussions, and he was

rarely able to participate. The other students tried to include him, but he just couldn't keep up with the discussions or anything. He couldn't integrate into the group. The difficulty in mathematics increased as well. By fourth or fifth grade, he was struggling academically, so he didn't continue in regular middle school" (001-F). After numerous struggles and faced with increasingly severe emotional issues in her child, 001-F ultimately chose to withdraw from public school inclusion education. Meanwhile, 002-F continued to persevere.

"By the third grade, his academics were falling behind, which is common for most of our special needs kids, as they struggle with academics" (002-F). "In middle school, he started to feel the pressure from both his emotions and academics. His emotional issues became severe in the second semester of sixth grade, and by the first year of middle school, it was even worse. By the time he was in ninth grade, he was facing the pressure of exams. Of course, the timeline varies for each child, but he started falling behind academically earlier" (002-F). "My husband and I broke down the knowledge into simpler parts, using flashcards and mind maps to tutor him" (002-F). "In high school, my son felt very isolated. The academic workload for his peers was so intense that he struggled to keep up with his studies and found that they were often too busy to engage in conversation with him" (002-F).

Additionally, both teachers and parents adjusted their educational expectations as the autistic students progressed through different stages of their lives. Teachers tended to set lower expectations from the beginning, accepting the child's limitations. "The teacher sometimes said, 'Don't be too strict with him'" (001-F). "Just keep the child quiet and following the class" (002-F). Parents, too, gradually lowered their expectations as their child advanced through life. They moved from high hopes, such as, "Back then, my wish was not as modest as it is now. I was sure my child would go to college because he was so smart, and I had such beautiful expectations", to more pragmatic considerations like, "Now, as we're approaching the next phase, we're wondering if we can arrange a simple job for him in our neighborhood, like sweeping the floor. He could get paid or not, even as a volunteer, as long as he has something to do, like working in property management, cleaning, or doing some small tasks" (001-F). "I used to think that Little D was in the top tier among autistic kids, and I just kept persisting, believing that he would make it through regular education. But the reality is that there is still a gap... because Little D has already graduated from high school (failed the college entrance exam)... He is a dreamer, even though he's not academically strong. I think it's more precious that he is full of love for life. Every day, he thinks about how to eat well, sleep well, have fun, and find a job that he enjoys. I believe these thoughts are perhaps more valuable than his academic scores" (002-F).

3.2.3 Social Isolation

Children with autism often exhibit a weakened sense of social awareness and face significant challenges in communication. Their difficulties in expressing emotions are particularly pronounced when it comes to initiating and responding to social interactions, maintaining eye contact, sharing objects, and recognizing and responding to others' emotional expressions. As a result, they frequently

struggle to establish and maintain peer relationships, which can lead to feelings of isolation.

One parent observed, “My child doesn’t seem to get along well with classmates. It’s like he just doesn’t enjoy being in a lively group setting”. (001-F)

Another parent shared her experience: “In elementary school, my child mainly needed to adapt to school life, which involved basic skills like self-care, classroom behavior, and following instructions. These were largely guided by teachers and supported by peers. As students move into middle school, they become less reliant on teacher guidance and develop their own judgments. Peer relationships become more influential, and middle schoolers often worry about being excluded by their peers. They use subtle cues and unwritten rules, which can be hard for children with special needs to navigate. When my son entered adolescence, his self-awareness developed rapidly, and he began to strongly desire peer relationships—something typical of his age. However, his lack of appropriate social skills created noticeable conflicts and contradictions. Middle school students tend to enjoy teasing and playing pranks, and my son couldn’t distinguish between malice and joking. At first, I tried to teach him how to tell the difference, but eventually, I let it go because he didn’t seem to mind being teased; in fact, he was happy to be interacting with others at all. This interaction, to some extent, fulfilled his social needs and alleviated his sense of loneliness. I believe that as long as the pranks aren’t too extreme, it’s okay not to be overly sensitive or make a big deal out of it. The school’s overall atmosphere and the class environment are crucial—if the teachers set a positive tone and there are no serious incidents of bullying, then some minor teasing isn’t a problem. My son still says the three years of middle school were his most unforgettable time. In high school, however, he felt extremely lonely. His classmates were overwhelmed with their studies, and he struggled to keep up academically. When he wanted to chat with them, they often didn’t have time, and most of their conversations were about schoolwork. He repeatedly asked them the same questions, and while they would respond politely, the interactions were brief and infrequent. There was no obvious exclusion or bullying, but my son still felt very isolated”. (002-F)

3.3 Enrollment Support

3.3.1 Challenges for Educators

When children with autism enter mainstream schools, teachers are tasked not only with adjusting teaching goals, content, and methods, but also with creating a positive classroom environment that fosters acceptance of these children by their peers and their parents, ensuring peaceful coexistence between both groups. To achieve these objectives, teachers require policy support, resources, and empowerment training from the school. However, in reality, such support is rarely provided, leaving teachers struggling to cope and feeling overwhelmed.

One parent remarked, “The elementary school teacher said she just couldn’t handle it anymore, and eventually, we had to switch classes and homeroom teachers. I think it was partly due to her menopause, which made her emotionally unstable, and also because some other parents questioned why there was

such a child in the class. Kids tend to mimic behavior, and my child would occasionally make noises, which some parents would exaggerate as a big issue. But there was no individualized support or educational plan tailored for my child”. (001-F)

Another parent shared, “The teacher frequently called to complain, so I couldn’t go to work. I had to constantly take leave, pick my child up from kindergarten, and bring him home. Later, when he started school, he was expected to sit still in class, but all the academic learning and homework was left to me and his father to handle. We understand the immense pressure on teachers in Beijing’s mainstream schools”. (002-F)

Currently, most frontline teachers involved in inclusive education in China are general primary and secondary school teachers who graduated from regular teacher training institutions. They gradually develop an understanding of the characteristics and learning needs of special students through classroom observation and testing. However, when faced with behavioral issues, emotional challenges, and interpersonal conflicts involving students with special needs, they often find themselves ill-equipped to handle these situations appropriately. As a result, these teachers are unable to meet the needs of special students in a timely manner. The lack of specialized knowledge and skills among general teachers, along with the difficulties and limitations this brings, has become a significant bottleneck in improving the quality of inclusive education in China.

3.3.2 Resource Constraints

Resource classrooms in mainstream schools are intended to support the development of inclusive education by providing a warm, flexible environment that fosters the growth of both special and general students. These classrooms should be well-equipped with professional resources and services to support the individualized learning and development of all students. Both parents mentioned resource classrooms as a key criterion when selecting schools for their children. However, the reality has been disappointing.

One parent stated, “The resource classroom was practically abandoned. These children were allocated a significant amount of funding, and there were resource classrooms and even a sandplay room, but the doors were always locked. When my child was in elementary school, we were never allowed to use them. There was supposed to be a psychological counselor, but we were never provided access. The equipment was there, but it was all locked away. Back then, the maternal and child health center in Changping also built a sandplay room. I knew some people there, so I asked if we could use their sandplay facilities, covering the costs ourselves and bringing in a professor from Beijing Normal University. We gathered a few nearby children to participate together. We used the facilities at the health center for several years”.

3.4 Policy Implementation

3.4.1 Information Barriers

Parents expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of access to policy-related information. Despite their proactive efforts to seek out such information, they often encounter challenges related to untimely, non-transparent, and inaccurate communication. Some parents, in an effort to better support their children in mainstream school settings, even resort to leveraging personal connections to obtain necessary information.

Regarding the channels through which they learn about policies, one parent shared, “It seems the government is somewhat passive. I usually receive policy information (about resource rooms, assistive devices etc.) from Ms. L (a leader at an organization), who shares it with me. Sometimes I ask relevant government officials directly whether certain policies exist, and they tell me to wait for official notifications, but getting information often feels like a tug-of-war”. (001-F)

Another parent voiced concerns about the availability of resources for inclusive education: “What is the distribution of inclusive education resources across different districts? Where is the resource center for your school district? Which schools have resource rooms, and what process should parents follow to apply for these resources? Shouldn’t this information be publicly available on official websites, making it easier for parents to access, rather than solely relying on school notifications?” (002-F) This indicates certain deficiencies in the frequency, scope, and accuracy of policy dissemination by relevant institutions (Mao, & Wang, 2023).

Given the high level of initiative displayed by parents in seeking out policy information, it is evident that government agencies, schools, and organizations like the Disabled Persons’ Federation need to enhance proactive information dissemination. By employing broader and more accurate channels to communicate relevant policies to parents, these institutions can help reduce information asymmetry and increase transparency and convenience in parents’ decision-making and application processes.

3.4.2 The Ideal and the Reality

When examining the inclusive education experiences of two children with autism, we observe unique phenomena in the implementation of inclusive education policies, characterized by “policies at the top, countermeasures at the bottom” and “formal compliance without substantive alignment”. Since its development in 1986, the policy of inclusive education has evolved from a simple directive tool into a more systematic and diversified implementation strategy. This evolution includes infrastructure development, technical training, incentives, and guidance measures, with a greater focus on teaching regulations, teacher training, and educational management to improve education quality and enhance the support system. However, related inclusive education policies remain mostly as guidelines, notices, and opinions, without being elevated to the level of national laws and regulations. The most authoritative regulation, the “Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities”, is merely an administrative regulation, leading to an excess of overarching guidance but insufficient directive power

and enforceability. Cooperation and integration between departments are suboptimal, resulting in a lack of attention to inclusive education by some relevant departments and personnel, leading to the marginalization of this work. The extent of implementation in schools often depends on the personal willingness of the principal.

As one parent noted: “If the principal supports it, the child can get into the school, and inclusive education can proceed. The principal said, ‘Let’s try for two weeks. If it doesn’t work out, we can send the child to a special school.’” (002-F).

Another parent expressed: “The principal said it’s too troublesome. If a child is admitted (under the LRC policy), there would be a lot of evaluations followed. It’s a good idea, but there aren’t enough teacher. All the subject teachers have their tasks, and there’s no dedicated teacher for this. You need space, staff, and evaluations. There’s also supervision from above”. (001-F).

When the researcher pointed out that this is a legal right of the child and that it should be defended, the parent’s response was filled with helplessness and sorrow. “What can I say? We have a good relationship with school staff. If you don’t know them and ask for something, they won’t give it to you, including the sandplay teacher and others. Parents are easily satisfied with the current situation. We don’t have high expectations from the relevant departments; as long as they can accept our suggestions, we are already very grateful. Otherwise, who can you turn to? No one cares about you. There are some parents who cause trouble (parents of children with autism), but it doesn’t solve the problem”. (001-F).

Traditional Confucian culture in China has long centered on the core idea of “benevolence”. While this promotes tolerance and acceptance of people with disabilities, it leads to the practice of inclusive education being driven more by “pity” and “charitable acts” rather than by ensuring and realizing the equal right to education for special students. This inevitably results in self-deprecation by special students and their parents, reinforcing their disadvantaged and unequal status.

Resource rooms, as a supplementary form of inclusive education, have been continually developing. In 2012, when the children of the two participants were in primary school, Beijing had approximately 1.1 million primary and secondary students, with 148 resource rooms established (Sun, 2013). However, interviews revealed a paradoxical situation: resource rooms in economically developed areas were underutilized, while those in less developed areas were in high demand but unavailable. This may stem from various factors, including uneven distribution of educational resources, inadequate supervision systems, changes in educational demand, and limitations in the understanding and utilization of educational resources. Although corresponding policies are in place to provide guidance and support for inclusive education, there remains a need for legal policies to offer detailed explanations and protect the legitimate rights and interests of children with autism and their families.

4. Discussion

4.1 Challenges of the Inclusive Education Policy

China's policy-making follows a top-down approach, where the central government establishes the macro policy framework through laws, regulations, plans, and guiding documents. Local governments then formulate detailed implementation rules and plans based on these central guidelines. When we examine how the macro policy of inclusive education manifests in the daily lives of families with autistic children, the importance of refining these policies becomes evident.

Currently, the inclusive education policy faces challenges such as vague wording and a lack of legal authority. The policy often takes the form of "measures", "notices", or "opinions", lacking the legal status of national laws and regulations, which results in relatively weak enforcement. Consequently, lower-level executors may selectively accept and implement the policy based on their interests (Dai, 2023). For example, although the state mandates that regular schools should admit autistic children capable of attending, many schools still refuse admission (Liang, & Gong, 2021), which is influenced by multiple factors: at the school level, concerns about the impact on teaching quality, school reputation, and potential loss of high-achieving students due to the pressure of maintaining high graduation rates; at the teacher level, concerns that special needs students may disrupt classroom order, and the disproportionate workload and rewards associated with these students could negatively impact performance evaluations, promotions, salaries, and social status; at the parental level, concerns that autistic children may disrupt their own children's learning environment, negatively affecting their safety and academic progress, leading to skepticism or even opposition to inclusive education. In some cases, this has led to parents collectively demanding the removal of special needs children from schools (Sina.com, 2021).

4.2 Lack of Support for Inclusive Education

Educational opportunities for autistic children in China are marked by significant regional disparities, evident in differences between cities, urban and suburban areas, and between urban and rural areas. Regular schools' acceptance of autistic children varies widely, and many families are constrained by geographical and economic conditions when choosing schools, resulting in unequal access to education for autistic children.

Moreover, the lack of effective support poses a significant challenge to the current inclusive education system for autistic children. The existing mechanisms and support systems for inclusive education are not yet fully developed. There is a lack of clear criteria and assessment standards to determine which autistic children are suitable for regular school education. Additionally, the professional training provided to teachers involved in inclusive education is insufficient, lacking regular and systematic training mechanisms, making it difficult for teachers to deliver effective instruction. Furthermore, it is imperative to address how to enhance the understanding of inclusive education among school administrators, especially principals, how to systematically monitor the implementation of inclusive

education in schools, how to provide comprehensive training to all regular teachers to improve their understanding of autism and their ability to respond professionally, and how to equip all students with adequate knowledge about the behavior and characteristics of autistic children and strategies for interacting with them, to enhance their ability to engage and coexist with autistic children. These are urgent issues that need to be addressed.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Enhancing Policy Clarity and Authority, Strengthening Policy Implementation

Enhancing the legal force of the inclusive education policy is crucial for its effective implementation. Firstly, it is essential to increase the political momentum of the policy by reinforcing its legal binding force. This can be achieved by refining relevant provisions in the Compulsory Education Law and the Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities, and by integrating successful local experiences in inclusive education into a comprehensive chapter within special education legislation. Elevating these policies to the level of national laws and regulations will ensure stronger legal effectiveness. Therefore, the enactment of a Special Education Law in China is an urgent necessity. In terms of policy articulation, abstract language should be avoided in favor of concrete, understandable, and operational expressions. For instance, specific standards for inclusive education should be clearly defined. To facilitate systematic change, it is imperative to improve the assessment and evaluation system for students in inclusive education, ensuring that the evaluation criteria are scientific and comprehensive.

Moreover, in terms of teacher training, it is essential to establish a Professional Standards for Inclusive Education Teachers, aiming to cultivate regular teachers with special education skills and special education teachers with regular education capabilities. This would contribute to the construction of a complete and professional teacher education system, thus promoting universal education and educational equity. Additionally, strengthening the policy implementation monitoring mechanism is critical. It is recommended to establish a dedicated supervisory body to dynamically monitor and evaluate the implementation of policies. Simultaneously, it is crucial to enhance the policy implementation capabilities of municipal and county-level education administrative departments, which are the primary governing bodies for the compulsory education and inclusive education of all children with disabilities. To ensure effective policy enforcement, reward and punishment measures should be refined, with explicit legal provisions for penalizing departments and individuals who fail to fulfill their responsibilities, ensuring accountability for any violations.

5.2 Strengthening Interdepartmental Collaboration and Integration to Build a Support System for Inclusive Education

Currently, most policy formulation relies heavily on the State Council and the Ministry of Education, with relatively limited involvement from other departments. However, the policy of inclusive education

involves multiple sectors, including education, development and reform, civil affairs, finance, and others, necessitating cross-departmental cooperation to establish an efficient advancement mechanism. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a clear interdepartmental cooperation framework, which should include defining the responsibilities and relationships among departments, promoting information sharing, and enhancing public communication efforts to ensure the comprehensive and effective implementation of policies.

Standardization is also key to improving the effectiveness of departmental collaboration. Consistent standards will ensure uniformity in the implementation of inclusive education policies across departments, thereby reducing issues arising from discrepancies in standards. By enhancing the operability and authority of policies, their implementation can be better ensured, thus providing more comprehensive and scientifically grounded educational support for children with autism. Furthermore, to advance the development of inclusive education, it is necessary to improve the supporting systems and establish a robust support framework. This includes addressing the inadequate attention from local governments and the insufficient and uneven allocation of funding for inclusive education. In terms of operational mechanisms, a comprehensive support system should be built, encompassing an assessment system for inclusive education candidates, a management system for inclusive education teachers, and a monitoring system for the funding allocation for inclusive education, all organized within a four-tier support structure (“province—city—county—school”). This will aid mainstream schools in effectively accommodating children with disabilities, enhancing the educational quality for these children, and promoting their social integration.

5.3 Clarifying the Responsibilities of Schools, Parents, and Society, and Strengthening Multilateral Collaboration

A lack of understanding and acceptance of students with special needs within society leads to various challenges and difficulties for these students in integrating into mainstream schools. Schools often lack effective support measures in inclusive education, such as an inclusive campus atmosphere, IEP for students with special needs, and specialized inclusive education teachers. Parents also have misconceptions about inclusive education, often believing that it solely involves helping their children adapt to the mainstream environment, while neglecting the responsibilities and obligations of schools in inclusive education. This situation results in a lack of effective collaboration in inclusive education practice, hindering the successful integration and development of students with special needs in mainstream schools.

The effective implementation of inclusive education policies requires the joint efforts of the government, schools, parents, and society. As the frontline of policy implementation, schools need to improve the accessibility and accuracy of policy information dissemination to parents, establish a comprehensive mechanism, support system for inclusive education and create a supportive campus environment. This may be one of the potential solutions to the current challenges. Parents also need to

actively promote a shift in their roles, foster positive school-parent relationships, and proactively engage in the process of inclusive education. Moreover, parents' feedback and suggestions should be considered as evaluation criteria for the quality and effectiveness of inclusive education services. By refining policies, enhancing collaboration among schools, families, and communities, and increasing societal inclusivity, educational environment support can be improved. This includes transforming public facilities for accessibility and integrating special education personnel and resources into the mainstream education system. Together, these efforts will provide appropriate education for students with disabilities, thereby creating a more equitable and fair educational environment.

6. Conclusion

Researchers have critically reflected on the challenges faced by the LRC policy in addressing the educational needs of children with autism and have drawn the following conclusions:

Firstly, while the LRC policy is a positive approach to inclusive education within its theoretical framework, there is a significant discrepancy between its implementation and the specific needs and individual differences of children with autism. This mismatch has resulted in these children facing more complex issues related to academic performance, social interaction, and emotional development within the inclusive classroom environment. Secondly, parents have reported multiple challenges encountered by children with autism during the compulsory education stage, including academic pressure, difficulties in peer interactions, and a lack of professional competence among teachers. These issues not only affect the learning experiences of children with autism but also impose additional stress and challenges on their families. Further analysis reveals that the root causes of these issues lie in unclear policies and a lack of educational support measures. The absence of personalized support and insufficient resources has prevented the LRC policy from fully meeting the special needs of children with autism, leaving them feeling neglected and marginalized within the educational system.

In conclusion, to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education, it is necessary to undertake a deeper reflection and adjustment of the LRC policy. Policymakers should place greater emphasis on the actual needs of children with autism and their families, providing more accurate, feasible, and authoritative support measures to ensure they have equal opportunities and resources in education. Additionally, there is a need to enhance teacher training and professional support to improve the educational system's capacity to address the needs of students with special requirements. Such efforts will contribute to the realization of the inclusive education philosophy and provide children with autism a more beneficial and sustainable inclusive educational experience.

7. Limitations

The sample used in this study included only the mothers of two children with autism from the Beijing area, which may not be generalizable to the broader population of individuals with autism. The study did not include representation from fathers of children with autism, and it only encompassed individuals who had already been diagnosed with autism, potentially excluding those who may have difficulty obtaining a diagnosis for various reasons.

8. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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