

Original Paper

The Realistic Dilemma and Practical Way Forward in the Construction of Preschool Inclusive Education Curriculum in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

One of the main approaches to enhancing the students' inclusive education competencies in preschool education programs is through the development of the curriculum for inclusive education. The following sections identify various challenges in the curriculum for preschool inclusive education offered at universities, through a critical literature review. They include incomprehensive unified and standardized curriculum guidelines, mismatched course content with practical demands, incomplete practical components, and assessment criteria that focused more on theory rather than skills. In the future, refinement in policy framework, optimization of curriculum content, innovation in teaching methodology, and improvement in the evaluation mechanism should be stressed. The training and support measures could enhance the preschool teacher trainees' competencies in inclusive education to improve the practice of preschool inclusive education in China.

Keywords

preschool inclusive education, curriculum construction, dilemma, way out

1. Introduction

Preschool inclusive education has been an important strategy implemented in many parts of the world to pursue equal and quality early childhood education. The Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China puts much emphasis on pursuing people-centered educational development, promoting equity in education, and developing inclusive preschool and special education. Inclusive preschool education is of great importance to realize the rights of education for children with special needs (HONG, LIU, & HE, 2024) The preschool teacher trainees will be the future educators in grassroots educational institutions and play a very important role in carrying out inclusive work. Their

competencies in inclusive education will determine whether children with special needs receive proper and effective education and support in preschool institutions. The "14th Five-Year Plan of Action for Upgrading Preschool Education Development" calls to include special education courses within the preschool education programs of higher education institutions in order to enhance the capability of teacher trainees in inclusive education. Therefore, building the construction of inclusive education course settings is really crucial for the cultivation of these competencies and their support for a broader implementation of preschool inclusive education in China (DENG, Ye, ZHANG et al., 2024).

At present, some teacher-training institutions have already begun the construction of special education courses. In particular, the training courses of preschool education majors are paying more and more attention to "preschool education + special education" (LI, 2024). What's more, it sets special education and child rehabilitation courses along with the general preschool education training courses. However, unified standards are far from being available, let alone the unified framework of the curriculum. Since the implementation of inclusive education courses usually requires revising the whole teacher training curriculum, this process is very complicated with lots of changes, coordination, and realignment involved. These complications bring about serious difficulties in guaranteeing the continuity, comprehensiveness, scientific rigors, and systematic structure of preschool inclusive education curricula. According to research, preschool inclusive education curricula should go beyond the traditional approach. Strategies to develop competence for inclusive education among students include increasing awareness of special education through various means, setting up practice bases of inclusive education, optimizing preschool education training programs, and cluster development of inclusive education courses. Through the presentation of an overarching review of related literature, the current research endeavors to systematically investigate the implementation of inclusive education course offered by Chinese preschool teacher-training institutions. The findings are bound to contribute to developing locally relevant inclusive education courses that can meet the current demand for inclusive education professionals in kindergartens.

2. The Realistic Dilemma of Preschool Inclusive Education Program Construction in Colleges and Universities

2.1 Lack of Unified Standardized Leadership in Curriculum Development

In the two phases of China's Special Education Enhancement Plan, the introduction of inclusive education courses in teacher education is clearly proposed. However, most of these proposals encourage but do not require their implementation, so actual progress has been limited. In many preschool education programs, courses regarding inclusive education have not yet been offered; knowledge on preschool inclusive education is absent from classroom teaching. Some universities have initiated inclusive education courses for the trainees of preschool teachers, often electives and usually facing problems such as "inconsistent leadership support, shortages of qualified faculty". Therefore, universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in determining whether to establish courses

in inclusive education for preschool programs (ZHANG, 2024). The leadership and systematic structure of the current university curricula are not consistent. Frequent revisions to the training programs result in interruptions or discontinuation, which undermine curriculum stability. Additionally, China has not established standardized criteria for inclusive education literacy for preschool teacher trainees. This lack of clear standards, added to the limited understanding among educators about the concept of preschool inclusive education literacy, further hinders the development and implementation of inclusive education courses in preschool education programs.

2.2 Deviation of Curriculum Content from Actual Needs

Along with the development of inclusive education, more and more children with special needs have entered kindergartens. These include children with hearing and visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other conditions. This places higher demands on kindergarten teachers, who must acquire competencies in inclusive education, especially in key areas like individualized teaching design and implementation, resource acquisition and integration, and collaborative teaching strategies. The courses should have main focuses on promoting acceptance of children with special needs; hence, providing teacher trainees with foundational knowledge and skills concerning special education. While this is in line with the evolving concept of inclusive education in China, very little emphasis is still placed on how to develop teachers' competencies to manage inclusive classrooms, and to support, communicate, and collaborate. The findings also show that these gaps inhibit the efficiency with which kindergarten teachers address practical inclusive education challenges (CUI, 2024). In addition, inclusive education courses primarily include theoretical contents focusing on concepts such as basic special education knowledge and development features in special needs children but lack much-needed practical skill building, so it is quite insufficient to give enough opportunities to get practical experiences for students in teaching with special needs children. This gap creates difficulty in solving actual problems faced by the teacher trainees in an inclusive education environment.

2.3 Lack of Effective Practical Aspects in the Implementation of the Curriculum

It is generally agreed upon by scholars that preschool inclusive teachers are "composite" teachers. Their roles are that of facilitators in developing typically developing children and children with special needs in coordination, and that of action researchers in the quality promotion of preschool inclusive education (YANG & SUN, 2024). The competencies required for such roles must be cultivated and refined through practical experience. However, current inclusive education programs predominantly rely on traditional teaching methods, offering limited opportunities for students to engage with and fully experience inclusive classrooms that integrate children with special needs. Moreover, essential training facilities, such as sensory rooms and resource classrooms, are often inadequately equipped to support the curriculum's practical implementation. Immersive and hands-on experiences are required for pre-service teacher trainees to internalize the concept of inclusive education and develop the required pedagogical skills. However, most practice bases for preschool education programs are standard

kindergartens, where students can hardly get in touch with children with special needs. Special education schools or other institutions serve as internship locations for some trainees, but their settings differ substantially from a kindergarten environment where they cannot authentically practice inclusive education in preschool settings.

2.4 Relatively Insufficient Operational and Skill-based Task Setting for Curriculum Evaluation

Developmental features and learning styles of preschool children require an approach to inclusive education that is quite different from the "studying with a class" model characteristic of the compulsory education stage. Preschool children acquire knowledge mainly through direct perception, hands-on exploration, and experience in play and daily life. As such, inclusive education programs at the preschool level should emphasize strong practical applicability, aiming to enhance the practical competencies of teacher trainees. The evaluation of these programs should focus on assessing teachers' abilities to effectively support children with special needs in regular classrooms. Key competencies include managing behavior, designing individualized education plans, adapting curricula and assessments, and fostering an inclusive classroom environment. However, current course assessments primarily focus on theoretical knowledge through assignments, staged tests, and practical tasks, often neglecting the evaluation of practical skills. This imbalance hinders an accurate assessment of trainees' readiness to handle real-world challenges (ZHAO & YU, 2024).

3. The Practical Way out for the Construction of Preschool Inclusive Education Programs in Colleges and Universities

At present, with the extension of inclusive education to the preschool stage in China, along with policies that ensure access to preschool education for children with disabilities and special needs, more and more children with special needs have joined mainstream kindergartens. High-quality preschool inclusive education is becoming an important part of the high-quality system of the whole nation (YU, MA, & TANG, 2022). Therefore, it is very urgent to cultivate preschool inclusive teachers. The foundation for developing inclusive education competencies lies in pre-service teacher preparation. Therefore, to advance the construction of inclusive education curricula for preschool education majors, the following countermeasures are proposed.

3.1 Improving Policy Documents

Since the emergence of preschool education, relevant policy documents have placed great emphasis on the cultivation of early childhood teachers' inclusive education literacy during the pre-service stage. However, promotion and implementation are still not effective, considering that higher education institutions retain their autonomy in decisions on the inclusion of such courses. Standards, in this case, should be part of the preschool teacher education curriculum that demands courses of inclusive education as necessary ones and clarifies details related to credits and study hour demands so that the relevant requirements will be put into certain teacher education policy documents so that the implementation of inclusive education courses for preschool education majors will go well and obtain

good effect. It is also recommended that teacher education programs include a clearly identified criterion of the development of inclusive education literacy among generalist early childhood teachers. This would promote not only quality early childhood teacher education but also its enforcement in terms of strong supervision and evaluation of educational policies. Additionally, it would also facilitate an increased pace in reforming and modernizing the curricula of preschool teacher training. For example, there is an urgent need to formulate the standards for preschool teachers in inclusive education and clearly outline the training objectives for such teachers. Such standards would help form a foundational framework for higher education institutions when designing and integrating inclusive education courses into the curriculum structure for preschool education programs. This needs to be a balance of theory and practice on aspects of inclusive education to effectively prepare the preschool teacher trainees. For the challenges of an inclusive classroom.

3.2 Optimization of Course Content

There should be more emphasis on the practical application and enhancement of skill through the curriculum content rather than an overemphasized focus on theoretical concepts. It should include issues about preschool children with special needs, underlining their competencies, for example, in classroom management, individualized teaching design, and implementation; thus, it would be close to the course objectives. Besides, projects of teaching practice should be made in correspondence with the course goals. Through both theoretical and practical means, these projects could develop gradually the students' capabilities in designing, implementing, and analyzing intervention programs for preschool children with special needs. Resources should be developed based on the needs of students. For example, a resource library of course cases was developed, including films related to preschool children with special needs, videos on actual education cases, and supplemental learning materials. Pre-school special education students are provided with adapted digital teaching materials prepared considering students' cognitive development features and professional peculiarities of the discipline, which satisfies personalized learning needs. Scientific research projects have been added to courses to increase students' participation in them. With active research on their part, the twin developments of students and teachers will go a long way in engaging the former with the contents while providing professional growth to both.

3.3 Innovative Teaching Methods

The pre-service training for early childhood teacher trainees mostly encompasses theoretical input at the foundation level. For such knowledge to be meaningful and applicable at the special education practice, it has to be internalized and externalized by the students so that in actual practice, they can apply it appropriately. Therefore, classroom teaching should be accompanied by various appropriate methods of instruction. For instance, a teacher can organize group discussions on certain case studies related to the education of children with special needs, such as language training for children with hearing impairments, music therapy for children with autism, or picture book therapy for children with intellectual disabilities. In this way, students can gain practical experience that will help them in their

future work within inclusive education. Moreover, viewing and analyzing the films and videos relevant to the children with special needs may turn the abstract theoretical knowledge into vivid and tangible insights. Group reading of special education-themed picture books and analysis from the prism of the acquired knowledge also enables students to speak to the inner world of children with special needs. The diverse teaching approaches make theoretical knowledge more interesting, accessible, and multifunctional, hence widening students' horizons and improving their practical skills. What is more, schools should create "bilateral" relations with kindergartens, special education schools, rehabilitation centers, and child welfare institutions that could provide facilities to host children in need. Improvement in the infrastructures for on-campus training centers and resource classrooms, in addition to the vigorous development of extracurricular programs in special education, will make it possible to provide opportunities to students to learn in and through varied ways of knowledge applications. This sort of collaboration and facilities provides students with various opportunities to relate with children having special needs thus giving wider exposure and professional competencies to the learners.

3.4 Improvement of Course Evaluation

The practical assessment orientation of the course should be strengthened by reducing the emphasis on student attendance and classroom performance and shifting the focus to the achievement of learning goals across the stages of pre-course, in-class, and post-course learning. In this regard, teachers can assess students' preparatory learning before the course commences through statistics generated on online platforms tracking activities such as courseware previews, video observations, and online pre-course tests. This approach will help the teacher to identify complicated areas for students and provide timely assistance to close the gaps in learning. Student performance during the course can be evaluated based on practical project designs and course reports. Assessment is student-centered and thus allows learners to compensate for their possible weaknesses in the preparatory work while actively applying theoretical knowledge in practice. Ascertains the ability of a student to apply learned knowledge in the solution of life problems after class. Post-course development tasks, reviewing assignments and practice reports, are provided by online platforms. Since the method monitors the whole process of learning with different dimensions considered in evaluating the performance of the students, multiple dimensions of achieving the goals of student performance are established. A scientifically designed and well-structured examination system measures the learning outcomes of students and fosters their holistic development by ensuring their integration of theory and practice.

In a nutshell, in the greater context of developing inclusive education, the training of teachers of early childhood education in universities needs to be proactively up to the task of meeting the demands of policy and practice. This necessarily requires reform in traditional preschool education curricula, including the integration of courses that systematically combine theoretical and practical aspects of inclusive education. These changes not only develop the professional competencies of pre-service early childhood teachers but also expand their professional scope, which would further contribute to promoting inclusive education practices in China's preschools. In addition, the promotion of preschool

inclusive education in China should be effectively conducted by reforming preschool education curriculum through integrating relevant theoretical and practical courses. These will enhance the professional quality and broaden the professional outlook of pre-service teachers to meet emerging demands related to inclusive education.

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