

Original Paper

Research on the Development of Integrated Educational Literacy among Students Majoring in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In recent years, China has implemented various policies to strengthen the development of inclusive education in early childhood education, particularly focusing on improving the pre-service training quality of teachers in this field. Therefore, this study aims to explore the current state of inclusive education literacy among early childhood education majors. The research subjects are 13 soon-to-graduate students majoring in early childhood education from higher education institutions in Guangdong Province. The study uses a case interview method and employs Nvivo14 software for coding analysis of the textual data. The results indicate that while early childhood education majors generally recognize the concept of inclusive education, they lack a deep understanding of it. They acknowledge the importance of inclusive education courses but have a relatively limited experience with its forms. Additionally, internship experiences with special needs children influence their self-efficacy in inclusive education to a certain extent.

Keywords

early childhood education, college students, inclusive education literacy

1. Introduction

Inclusive early childhood education refers to the educational format where children with special educational needs are placed in regular kindergartens to receive care and education alongside typically

developing children (Zhou, 2006). Numerous studies have confirmed that inclusive early childhood education benefits not only the behavior correction, intellectual development, defect compensation, and personality development of children with special needs but also fosters empathy, self-awareness, and prosocial behavior in typically developing children (Ye et al., 2009). Inclusive education at the preschool level is significant for the intellectual development, behavior correction, defect compensation, and healthy personality development of special needs children, as well as for promoting self-awareness, understanding others' abilities, and prosocial behavior in typically developing children. However, merely placing children with special needs and typically developing children in the same classroom does not ensure high-standard inclusive education. Only high-quality inclusive early childhood education can positively impact the physical and mental development of special needs children (Boyd et al., 2010).

Currently, China has the foundation and conditions to fully implement inclusive early childhood education, but it remains a shortfall in both early childhood education and special education. Issues such as insufficient resource allocation, low teacher professionalism, poor working conditions, ineffective teaching, and lack of parental cooperation hinder the efficient and orderly development of inclusive early childhood education in China (Zhang et al., 2011). The attitudes of regular kindergarten teachers towards special needs children in inclusive education significantly affect the smooth development of inclusive education and have considerable implications for practice and reform (Yang, 2005). As the key figures in implementing inclusive early childhood education, the status of early childhood teachers directly influences the execution of inclusive education and the physical and mental development of all children (Ye et al., 2022). Therefore, the early childhood teacher group, which plays an irreplaceable role in early inclusive education, needs more than basic early childhood education professional qualities to promote the healthy development of all children. It is urgent to cultivate inclusive education literacy among early childhood teachers to better implement and develop inclusive early childhood education (Guo, 2019).

The World Health Organization's 2011 "World Report on Disability" and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education's 2012 report on teacher education both highlight that pre-service preparation, in-service training, and professional development of teachers are crucial for advancing inclusive education (Donnelly et al., 2011). Therefore, it is imperative for higher education institutions to adopt appropriate methods to cultivate inclusive education literacy among early childhood education majors.

Upon reviewing the literature, it is found that most researchers discuss the pre-service cultivation of inclusive education literacy among early childhood education majors from a theoretical perspective, with few conducting empirical studies. There is scant research on the cultivation of inclusive education literacy among undergraduate early childhood education students, mainly focusing on curriculum design. Hence, this study aims to examine the current state and issues of cultivating inclusive education literacy among early childhood education majors in Guangdong through interviews, proposing

countermeasures to contribute to the development of inclusive education literacy among pre-service early childhood education teachers.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Participants

This study explores the current state and characteristics of inclusive education literacy development among early childhood education majors in Guangdong Province. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 13 early childhood education students. These participants are students from higher education institutions in Guangdong Province, who are in their final year and have been assigned by their schools to undertake a semester-long internship at kindergartens. Their internship period is either about to end or has already ended. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, alphabetical codes were used instead of real names. The basic information of the researchers is shown in Table 1.

2.2 Research Procedure

The data for this study were collected from personal interviews conducted with the participants between December 26, 2023, and January 27, 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and began with pre-prepared questions, following a semi-structured format. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and promptly transcribed into text, resulting in 13 interview transcripts.

2.3 Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study used Nvivo14 software and employed coding techniques based on thematic analysis. This approach involves analyzing and categorizing textual data to identify and understand specific themes or issues. The first-level themes aim to identify similar or related types from the collected raw data, naming these types to define their concepts and dimensions. During the first-level theme coding process, 141 original statements and concepts were generated, ultimately resulting in 51 categories. Based on this, second-level theme coding yielded 14 main categories, including understanding of inclusive education, the necessity of inclusive education, learning status of inclusive education courses, types of inclusive education courses, degree of inclusive education knowledge, school aspects, teacher aspects, children's characteristics, internship practice actions, combination of theory and practice, optimization of curriculum and services, teacher teaching, and subject linkage. The third-level theme involves further thematic induction on a second-level theme category, aiming to identify core categories around which other proposed categories can be grouped and integrated. This study identified 5 core main categories using third-level themes: understanding of inclusive education, current state of inclusive education in higher education institutions, difficulties in implementing inclusive education, internship experiences and preparedness, and strategies for cultivating inclusive education literacy.

3. Research Results and Analysis

3.1 Understanding of Inclusive Education

3.1.1 Vague Understanding of the Concept of Inclusive Education

The enhancement of inclusive education literacy stems from a deep understanding of the concept of inclusive education. The degree to which students grasp this concept reflects their mastery of related knowledge. A profound understanding of the essence and value of inclusive education is crucial for effectively promoting its development in practice. However, many students still have incomplete understanding of inclusive education. Some students believe that inclusive education means special needs children learning together with typical children. Others admit their lack of understanding, indicating challenges and difficulties faced by universities in cultivating students' inclusive education literacy.

"I think inclusive education might involve many children in a class, including some special children. Teachers educate them solidly, which is called inclusive education (Student K, January 23, 2024)."

"Maybe it's the process of integrating special children into normal teaching activities, allowing them to experience the same teaching activities as normal children (Student L, January 24, 2024)."

3.1.2 Endorsement of Inclusive Education Concepts

The concept of inclusive education advocates inclusivity in educational environments, especially providing equal learning opportunities for students with special educational needs alongside their peers. Students generally endorse this concept, believing that teachers should give more care and attention to special children. This approach not only aligns with educational humanitarianism but also embodies values of social equity and justice.

"During my internship, I encountered some special children in every class, such as those with autism or those with violent tendencies. As a preschool education teacher, compared with ordinary children, I need to give more attention to special children (Student G, December 28, 2023)."

"I think inclusive education embodies educational fairness. The highest returns come from early intervention. After inclusive education, special children show obvious improvements in their symptoms, gradually moving towards normalcy (Student M, January 27, 2024)."

3.1.3 Support for Kindergarten Implementation of Inclusive Education

Students express strong support for integrating special children into regular kindergarten environments. They believe this process allows for growth opportunities for both special and typical children, as well as teachers. However, opinions vary regarding the types of special children suitable for integration. Lightly affected special children are generally supported to join regular kindergartens, while those with more severe conditions are suggested to attend specialized institutions for rehabilitation.

"If it's a mild case, I agree. But for more severe cases, specialized institutions might be better. Mildly special children benefit from kindergarten integration by adapting to regular rhythms and classes, which helps them better adapt to society later on. In the class where I interned, the child with autism has made great progress since enrollment (Student A, December 26, 2023)."

"I support it. When mildly affected children go to kindergarten and interact with normal children, they can acquire more social skills and have better development. It's helpful for the social development of special children and the growth of teachers as well (Student B, December 26, 2023)."

"For special children, being with normal children helps in observation, imitation, and learning processes, which is crucial. It also promotes socialization because some children may be more closed and isolated, so they need an environment to motivate them. From the perspective of normal children, interacting with children slightly different from themselves increases their tolerance and teaches them to respect others equally, which is a good quality (Student F, December 28, 2023)."

3.1.4 Challenges of Kindergarten Inclusive Education

Integrating special children into kindergartens poses significant challenges and pressures. Ensuring their safety is a top priority, and parents of typical students often expect a disturbance-free educational environment. Due to the unique needs of special children, their integration is not always accepted or understood by all parents. Teachers face challenges in managing classrooms where both typical and special children coexist, exacerbated by shortages of qualified staff in kindergartens.

"I feel that the current state of inclusive education in kindergartens is not ideal. When I was on my internship, there were special children in regular schools, and the class had quite a few children. The teacher couldn't handle them at all (Student C, December 26, 2023)."

"Kindergarten teachers occasionally intervene, but they don't pay much attention, possibly because they're too busy. Teachers have to evaluate their professional titles and conduct research, which keeps them very busy, feeling somewhat overwhelmed (Student F, December 27, 2023)."

"Inclusive education can help special children intervene and grow, but it may also burden kindergarten teachers because some children may need a dedicated teacher to look after them. Of course, teachers prefer fewer special children in their classes, as resources are limited. If all teachers' efforts are focused on special children, normal educational activities in the class cannot be conducted properly. Teachers in my internship class are particularly troubled because they can't cope with teaching if something happens with special children. For difficult special children, teachers have to use more severe or strict measures to stop some of their more extreme behaviors (Student M, January 27, 2024)."

3.2 Views on Inclusive Education Courses

3.2.1 Affirmation of the Importance of Inclusive Education Courses

Courses play a critical role as the core carriers of knowledge dissemination in the field of education. Through course learning, students can quickly absorb relevant theoretical knowledge, which is equally significant in the realm of inclusive education. Courses construct a comprehensive knowledge system for students, aiding them in better understanding and mastering the concepts and practices of inclusive education. After acquiring the relevant theories, students need to apply this knowledge to their practical work. Practical cases and lessons provided in the courses help them find appropriate solutions when facing real-world problems. Furthermore, courses guide students to establish correct educational concepts, focus on individual differences among students, and respect their interests and strengths,

thereby better promoting the implementation of inclusive education. Students have shown a positive attitude toward the inclusive education courses offered by their schools.

"I think it is very necessary because inclusive education is a major trend. In the future, it will definitely move closer to this aspect. Everyone likes these courses quite a bit and feels that they are very practical (Student B, December 26, 2023)."

"Before my internship, I thought learning this course was not very important. However, after entering the kindergarten, I found that learning this course is very important because there are one or two special children in every class in my current internship kindergarten. I think learning this course really helps our work. It prevents us from feeling completely unprepared and unfamiliar when we actually encounter special children (Student E, December 27, 2023)."

"If we do not learn about special children, we cannot better face them in kindergartens. To get along well with children, we definitely need to understand various types of children so that we can handle different situations. So, it is very important (Student F, December 27, 2023)."

3.2.2 Inclusive Education Courses as the Sole Source of Knowledge

In terms of understanding inclusive education, students primarily rely on theoretical instruction from teachers in the classroom. However, this type of knowledge is highly theoretical and may not effectively assist students in dealing with issues involving special children encountered during internships. Some students have not even been exposed to any inclusive education courses, resulting in almost zero knowledge reserves in the field of inclusive education. Practically, schools do not specifically arrange practical guidance or provide observation opportunities related to inclusive education for students. Thus, relying solely on inclusive education courses as the only way to cultivate students' inclusive education literacy is far from sufficient.

"In the third year of university, we have one or two courses related to special education, such as Individualized Education Programs and Introduction to Special Education. The school has never arranged for us to visit, experiment, or train at special education schools or institutions (Student C, December 26, 2023)."

"In my courses, there is basically no inclusive education course. However, some courses, such as physiology and another course, involve content about special behavior intervention, which includes special children. Regarding how to educate special children specifically, I am still exploring and discussing with the kindergarten during my internship (Student M, January 27, 2024)."

"I have not studied it. The school offers an elective course, but due to the teacher's schedule, it was not arranged (Student K, January 23, 2024)."

3.3 Internship Experience and Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Education

3.3.1 Students with Experience in Educating Special Children Show Higher Self-Efficacy

Internships in kindergartens provide students with a practical platform where they can apply the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations. This process helps deepen their understanding and mastery of professional knowledge by solving real problems. During internships,

students acquire professional skills that are difficult to learn from books, including communication and coordination with colleagues and parents, problem discovery and resolution, and effective intervention for special children. By completing tasks and solving problems during their internships, students gain experience and confidence in handling inclusive education issues. Those with practical experience in inclusive education exhibit higher self-efficacy regarding their ability to adapt to potential future careers in this field.

"As a teacher, because of the frequent contact with children and the comparison with other children, it is easy to notice some issues with special children. I persist in communicating with their parents and implement segmented teaching for special children, creating individualized education plans. Teaching them might be more challenging than teaching typical children. However, I might not be able to do it alone and need support and help from the kindergarten (Student A, December 26, 2023)."

"I had a four-month internship, and I found that if you follow up with a child one-on-one for a long time, you can clearly see changes. Their expressive abilities improve, and their social skills also develop to some extent (Student L, January 24, 2024)."

"I believe I have the ability because my roommate is studying special education, and I have been influenced by them. We often communicate, and I believe that finding the right method and having more patience can help special children. However, I still lack sufficient practical experience in inclusive education and need special education professionals to guide the children (Student G, December 28, 2023)."

3.3.2 Students Without Experience in Educating Special Children Show Lower Self-Efficacy

Despite acknowledging and respecting the educational rights of special children, some students express that due to lack of exposure or internship experience with special children, they do not have sufficient experience and skills to handle issues that arise with special children, especially abnormal behavioral problems. They feel unprepared and often at a loss when such situations occur. These students worry that implementing inclusive education might negatively impact regular teachers and students and are concerned about their ability to manage inclusive education work. They feel unprepared to address the challenges of inclusive education, including individual assessments, managing behavioral issues, resolving conflicts between typical and special students, creating an inclusive environment, and selecting the best teaching methods based on student needs.

"I feel it might be a bit difficult. After all, theoretical knowledge is just theory, and I have never actually interacted with them. They might have some unexpected situations, and I feel that the surrounding teachers are not very knowledgeable in this area, which makes me a bit anxious. For example, in kindergartens, the safety of children is the top priority. Special children might have tendencies like self-harm or aggressive behavior, such as throwing chairs to hurt others. In such cases, I worry about being unable to handle it (Student B, December 26, 2023)."

"I would be willing to accept them, but I still worry that I might not be able to cater to their development properly. I feel that special children may not be able to participate in daily activities like

typical children and might need an additional teacher to look after them. Safety is my top priority, and I am concerned about possible fights among children. In the kindergarten where I am interning, teachers are already very busy (Student C, December 26, 2023)."

"I don't think I have the ability yet because I haven't encountered special children. So, I don't know how I would react when facing them. Without exposure, I can't guarantee that I can help them. I still need to learn. If such a situation arises, I will try my best to look up information and consult more experienced teachers. I will explore in practice and try to help them, but I cannot do it alone (Student D, December 27, 2023)."

"I don't think I have the ability yet. In the kindergarten where I am interning, there is a class with such a situation. I see that the teacher is very tired and helpless because there aren't many teachers in the class, and no one can follow the special child all day. The teacher cannot fully focus on one special child due to lack of energy, which is very frustrating. So, I think special children in the class put pressure on teachers and add extra work (Student K, January 23, 2024)."

4. Discussion and Suggestions

This study aims to reveal the current development status of inclusive education literacy among preschool education students. Based on the research results, the discussion is as follows:

The overall development of inclusive education literacy among preschool education students is uneven. This falls far short of the urgent need for inclusive education literacy among preschool teachers in China, indicating significant room for improvement. Regarding curriculum design, only a few teacher training colleges offer or have offered mandatory or elective courses in special education. These courses are limited in scale, lacking systematic and scientific approaches, making it challenging for students to be truly competent in inclusive education in real teaching scenarios. Additionally, preschool education students' mastery of inclusive education skills is not profound, leading to insufficient self-efficacy for implementing inclusive education in the future, which will pose challenges in flexibly applying these skills in work settings.

Rakap and Parlak (2017) believe that the successful implementation of inclusive education mainly depends on teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs, their inclusiveness, and their willingness to cooperate with special needs children in the classroom. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on cultivating students' concepts of inclusive education and enhancing their understanding and recognition of special children's education. To achieve the goals of inclusive education, the curriculum for preschool education majors should focus on developing students' inclusive education literacy. Kurth et al. (2014) assert that teacher education courses must foster students' strong support for inclusive education, skill development, and critical awareness of inclusive education. Professional learning in inclusive education teaching strategies may help teachers enhance their beliefs and abilities to conduct inclusive education (Woodcock et al., 2023).

Kurth et al. (2014) suggest that to prepare preservice teachers for inclusive learning environments,

there must be an internship environment dedicated to learning and implementing inclusive practices. Research indicates that preservice teachers' internship experiences can enhance their self-efficacy in teaching and attitudes towards inclusive education (Weber & Greiner, 2019). The training level of preservice education and special education experience positively impact the efficacy of inclusive education (Shaukat et al., 2013). Hemmings et al. (2011) assert that observing effective classroom demonstrations in practice can influence preservice teachers' self-efficacy regarding inclusive education. Therefore, preschool education curricula should incorporate more practical courses in inclusive education to enhance students' understanding and practical abilities in inclusive education.

This study encountered several limiting factors during its design and implementation, which may affect the broad applicability and interpretability of the results. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, which limits the statistical power of our results and may reduce their generalizability. A small sample size might increase the probability of random errors, indicating statistically significant results that might not hold true in a larger population. Furthermore, the uneven data distribution implies that certain analyses might be overly influenced by specific subgroup characteristics that are not common in the broader population. Future research can overcome these limitations by increasing the sample size and ensuring the sample's representativeness. Larger and more representative samples will enhance statistical validity and make the results more generalizable.

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