

The Impact of Regular Elementary School Teachers' Attitudes on Inclusive Education for Special Needs Children and Improvement Suggestions

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Abstract: Inclusive education is a crucial component of contemporary global education and a means to ensure educational equity for all students. In China, inclusive education is still in its nascent stages, with the primary approach being the integration of special needs students into regular elementary school classrooms. This paper uses an elementary school in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, as a case study. Through field observations and questionnaire surveys, it explores the current state of inclusive education in Hangzhou's elementary schools, evaluating teachers' and students' attitudes towards inclusive education and integrated classes. It identifies existing problems and challenges and proposes suggestions for improvement.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Integrated Classes, Teacher Attitudes, Implementation Needs, Teaching Strategies

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance of the Study

Inclusive education, also known as mainstream education, originated in the West and typically operates through integrated class models in China. It is a new form of special education that benefits children with special needs by allowing them to attend regular schools, where they should receive appropriate educational resources and environments.

With the advancement of inclusive education in China, there is a growing societal demand for regular teachers to possess the capability to educate and assist children with disabilities and special needs. However, many issues persist in the current domestic inclusive education system, such as the attitudes of teachers and students in regular schools and the difficulty in meeting the educational needs of special children. It is crucial to identify these shortcomings. By examining the state of inclusive education in elementary schools and the attitudes of teachers and students, we can identify areas for improvement, which holds practical significance for the development of inclusive education in Hangzhou's public elementary schools.

1.2. Literature Review

According to the data compiled from the literature, research on inclusive education has gradually developed since the 1990s and has gained increasing attention in recent years. The number of publications has been rising yearly, with a significant surge in the past five years, reaching new heights in 2019 and 2020. More and more families are opting for their special needs children to attend regular schools, and government policies are further supporting this trend. Thus, research on inclusive education is expected to achieve new breakthroughs in the future.

1.2.1. Overview of Research Status

Based on the reviewed literature, current research on inclusive education and integrated classes in elementary schools mainly focuses on several aspects:

1.2.1.1. Comparison and Reflection on Inclusive Education between China and Abroad

Inclusive education first developed in the West. In his article "Current Situation and Development Trends of Integrated Classes for Children with Disabilities," [1] Hua Guodong mentioned that integrated classes began to gradually expand in China in the late 1980s. The United States and the United Kingdom have already established mature systems and institutions for inclusive education, with more diversified models and professional teaching staff. The study by Cao Jieqiong et al., titled "Comparison and Reflection on Inclusive Education in the United States, Japan, and Mainland China," indicates that the U.S. has four different models of inclusive education, equipped with itinerant teachers and well-equipped resource rooms to assist regular schools, thereby reducing the teaching pressure on regular teachers. [2]

Zhang Li and Zhou Jing also discussed in their study on the UK's inclusive education that the British government is increasingly emphasizing the development of inclusive education through "multi-departmental cooperation." This approach ensures that families, schools, and various social sectors work together to meet the educational needs of special children and improve educational quality. In China, the primary form of inclusive education is still integrated classes [3]. Meanwhile, Deng Meng et al. mentioned in their 2012 article that, influenced by traditional educational philosophies, Chinese education still places a strong emphasis on academic performance and advancement, with less focus on educational equity. [4]

1.2.1.2. Acceptance Attitudes of Teachers and Students in Regular Elementary Schools Towards Special Needs Children

According to Pan Xin et al.'s 2021 research findings, a psychologically equal, accepting, and mutually supportive environment benefits the growth and development of special needs children [5]. Therefore, the attitudes of teachers and students in regular schools and the roles of teachers are particularly important. These acceptance attitudes manifest in various ways, such as physical, behavioral, and social interactions. Teachers' equal and professional guidance can directly promote the growth of special needs children and influence the moral cognition of regular students, creating a better and more positive environment.

At the same time, the attitudes of students cannot be ignored. Regular students with positive attitudes can help special needs children better achieve the goals of integrated classes and social integration, thus accelerating their integration into society. Hence, the attitudes of teachers and students are crucial in the process of integrating special needs children.

1.2.1.3. Professional Development of Regular Teachers in the Context of Inclusive Education

Currently, inclusive education has a relatively short development history in China, and there are many unclear aspects in professional training related to the curriculum. Feng Yajing et al. pointed out that higher education training mainly focuses on theoretical techniques, lacking practical experience and teaching. This teaching method results in teachers being unable to tailor their teaching to individual needs and neglecting various aspects of practical teaching. The mechanical teaching focused on knowledge transmission hinders the comprehensive development of teachers. Additionally, Deng Meng et al. [6] highlighted that regular teachers still lag behind special education teachers. The professional training of regular teachers rarely involves special education, and many regular teachers face challenges in ensuring teaching quality in real school settings, indicating an area in need of improvement in teacher education [7].

1.2.2. Existing Issues

1.2.2.1. Attitudinal Issues of Teachers and Students in Regular Schools

An equal, mutually supportive, and inclusive school environment can promote the growth of special needs children. In the "Analysis and Prospects of the Research on the Inclusive Education Literacy of Teachers in Integrated Classes in China," [8] Wang Yan et al. pointed out that the cognition, understanding, and attitudes of teachers and students towards special needs children in regular elementary schools significantly affect the development and effectiveness of integrated classes. Due to limited understanding of special education, the specific attitudes and acceptance behaviors of teachers and students towards special needs children may vary. Zhang Yuhong's 2014 survey found that although the overall attitudes of teachers and students are positive, various factors can still lead to negative acceptance attitudes [9].

1.2.2.2. Lack of Social and Legal Support for the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Firstly, societal attitudes towards the integrated classes for special needs children are inconsistent. Some parents of regular students are reluctant for their children to study alongside special needs children and hold negative views on inclusive education. Based on the experiences of other countries in implementing inclusive education, the cooperation of various social sectors and departments is crucial. For example, Zhang Chao et al. found in their 2013 study that the U.S. arranges itinerant therapists for students and sets up special resource rooms in schools to ensure the quality of inclusive education through a well-established system [10].

Regarding related legal support, Peng Xiaguang's 2019 survey revealed that there is still a lack of emphasis on this aspect. Although some relevant laws and regulations exist domestically, they are still lacking in operability, and the mandatory nature of these laws is not strong [11].

2. Research Objectives and Content

2.1. Research Content

This study uses E Elementary School in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, as a case study. It selects first, second, and third-grade students as samples, choosing two classes from each grade as the research subjects. The investigation covers the teachers and students of these classes to explore the extent of inclusive education, the attitudes of teachers and students towards special needs students, the measures adopted, and the difficulties encountered. The research subjects include all students, homeroom teachers, and subject teachers from two classes in each of the first, second, and third grades

that have special needs students, totaling 16 teachers and 264 students, with 23 of them being special needs students.

2.2. Research Methods

The research primarily employs field observation, interviews, and questionnaire surveys. The questionnaire used, titled "Survey on Regular Elementary School Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education," consists of four parts with 50 questions. Part One (Questions 1-11): Collects basic information about the teachers. Part Two (Questions 12-30): Contains a scale measuring attitudes towards inclusive education and integrated classes. Part Three (Questions 31-40): Focuses on the teachers' psychological state and self-efficacy. Part Four (Questions 41-48): Examines the current educational challenges and concerns faced by teachers and gathers their suggestions. The survey uses a scoring method. Responses in the second part are rated on a five-point scale: "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Neutral," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree," with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Similarly, the third part uses a five-point scale: "Completely Inapplicable," "Mostly Inapplicable," "Uncertain," "Mostly Applicable," and "Completely Applicable," also scored from 1 to 5. Finally, the study collected a total of 18 completed questionnaires from teachers. The collected data was organized and analyzed using Excel software.

3. Research Results

3.1. Professional Gaps Among Teachers

The survey results indicate that most of the teachers surveyed graduated from regular teacher training programs and have not received specialized training in special education. Younger teachers, compared to their older counterparts, have acquired more knowledge about special education during their college education, but this is still limited to a few specialized courses. Only one teacher received specialized training in special education after graduating from college.

3.2. Differences in Teachers' Attitudes

Table 1 summarizes the overall data from questions 12-30 in the second part of the 16 questionnaires. According to the scoring rules, each question has a maximum score of 5 points, with a total score of 90 points per question. The data shows that the average total score is 3.872 points, indicating that the surveyed teachers generally have an accepting attitude towards the format of integrated classes and special needs students. However, the standard deviation reveals significant fluctuations in responses to individual questions, with some responses indicating "disagree" and "strongly disagree."

Table 1: Results of Teachers' Basic Attitude Questionnaire

Maximum Score	Minimum Score	Average Score	Standard Deviation
4.230	3.763	3.872	0.864

3.3. Teachers' Psychological State and Self-Efficacy

Table 2 provides the overall data from questions 31-40 in the third part of the 16 questionnaires. The large standard deviation indicates significant differences in self-efficacy among teachers, suggesting that handling different types of special needs students affects their feelings differently. The data also shows that this aspect is not significantly related to age. However, teachers who have some understanding of or have received training in special education have higher self-efficacy. They better understand the reasons behind various student behaviors and can find ways to address them.

Table 2: Results of Teachers' Psychological State and Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Maximum Score	Minimum Score	Average Score	Standard Deviation
4.925	2.860	3.768	1.044

3.4. Attitudes of Regular Elementary Students Towards Special Needs Children

Through field observation, behaviors of regular elementary students in class and during breaks were recorded. In first grade, a certain number of students showed tendencies towards allergies, and a small number of special needs children had physical or intellectual disabilities. First-grade students generally displayed friendly behavior towards special needs children and were willing to help them. In contrast, some third-grade students, such as a group of boys from class 302, exhibited annoyance towards special needs children. They would mock and imitate the responses of special needs children during class and try to tease them during recess. Interviews with regular students revealed that they did not perceive these actions as malicious but found them amusing. Additionally, in class, when special needs children struggled to answer simple questions, many regular students felt their time was wasted and engaged in deliberate mockery.

4. Discussion and Insights

4.1. Providing Special Education Training to Enhance Teachers' Professional Skills

The survey results indicate that some teachers display unaccepting attitudes towards special needs children or do not employ special methods because they lack the knowledge on how to handle such situations. Their professional training seldom included special education knowledge. Therefore, post-employment training is crucial, allowing teachers to gain real experience in actual teaching scenarios and better understand existing problems. As Block's 2019 study found, educators need to integrate special education knowledge with practical experience to create an innovative learning environment for special needs children [12]. Regularly providing appropriate special education training to general education teachers, and enabling them to apply this knowledge in their daily teaching, benefits both teachers and special needs children.

4.2. Enhancing Guidance and Education for Regular Students

The attitudes of regular students significantly influence the development and integration of special needs children. The research shows that first-grade special needs children are better integrated than those in the third grade. Additionally, parents' attitudes influence their children's attitudes towards inclusive education. Some parents are unwilling for their children to study with special needs children and hold negative views towards inclusive education, leading to a lack of acceptance among some students.

Educators must first appropriately educate students, promptly correcting unfriendly behaviors towards special needs children to prevent widespread inappropriate behavior within the class. Secondly, the importance of home-school cooperation should be emphasized, helping parents understand the significance of current inclusive education practices, thus shaping positive attitudes among parents and students. Lastly, teachers should subtly influence students' attitudes during classroom education. By alleviating their own teaching pressures, teachers can facilitate deeper understanding and mutual acceptance between regular and special needs students, fostering a friendly and accepting attitude.

4.3. Increasing School Support for Integrated Classes and Improving Related Laws and Regulations

Daily classroom teaching in China primarily focuses on basic elementary school courses, with few schools offering inclusive education-related courses. Regular elementary schools could consider appointing teachers specifically responsible for special needs education, assisting special needs children during self-study periods or after-school tutoring to help them understand classroom content and reduce the teaching pressure on regular teachers. Hu Zhifeng et al. pointed out that the fundamental challenge in the development of inclusive education in China lies in the flaws of the system and legal framework. Enhanced awareness among policymakers is essential to formulate better policies and address existing issues [13]. Improving relevant laws and regulations can promote educational equity, influencing and changing the attitudes of regular teachers and students to foster greater acceptance of special needs children.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examined the impact of regular elementary school teachers' attitudes on the integration of special needs children using multiple research methods, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and on-site observations. Field research in a Hangzhou elementary school revealed that despite generally supportive attitudes, the implementation of inclusive education faces significant challenges such as insufficient professional training for teachers and a lack of teaching resources.

The study emphasizes that enhancing teachers' professional skills and providing systematic in-service training are key to effectively promoting inclusive education in regular elementary schools. Findings indicate that teachers often feel inadequately prepared to meet the needs of special education, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced special education training. Accordingly, it is recommended that education departments optimize teacher training programs, focusing on adaptive teaching methods and psychological support skills. The acceptance and inclusiveness of regular students directly affect the learning and social experiences of special needs children. The research highlights the significant influence of peer relationships and school culture on student attitudes. Schools should enhance students' awareness of inclusiveness through emotional education and multicultural activities, fostering a supportive learning environment. Additionally, family and community involvement is crucial for advancing inclusive education. Schools need to collaborate with parents and the community, raising parental awareness and implementing community education programs to create a positively engaging educational environment.

In conclusion, advancing inclusive education requires multifaceted efforts and improvements. Only through continuous educational practice optimization and policy support can true educational equality and pluralistic integration be achieved in regular elementary schools.

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