

Dilemmas and Pathways of the Support System for Preschool Inclusive Education from an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of the continuous advancement of inclusive education, the enrollment of children with special needs in regular kindergartens during the preschool stage has gradually become an important trend in educational development. However, compared with the compulsory education stage, preschool inclusive education in my country is still in the exploratory stage, especially in terms of the construction of the support system, where there are prominent problems. This article takes the practice of inclusive education in a private kindergarten in Chongqing as a case study, and analyzes the practical difficulties in the implementation of preschool inclusive education in combination with ecosystem theory. The study finds that the development of children with special needs is not only affected by individual differences, but also closely related to the interaction between the kindergarten environment, teachers' professional competence, the degree of family involvement, and external support resources. In the case study, the principal's educational philosophy facilitated the smooth enrollment of children with special needs, but in the subsequent implementation process, problems such as teachers' professional pressure, difficulties in adapting to the curriculum, limited home-school collaboration, and the dispersion of professional support resources gradually emerged. Based on ecosystem theory, this article discusses the structural problems in the current preschool inclusive education support system from four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, external system, and macrosystem, and proposes corresponding optimization paths to provide a reference for regular kindergartens to carry out inclusive education.

Keywords:

Ecosystem Theory, Inclusive Early Childhood Education, Support System, Mainstream Education, Children With Special Needs

1. A Realistic Shift in Preschool Inclusive Education

In recent years, inclusive education has gradually shifted from being an advocacy concept in the field of special education to a practical exploration within the mainstream education system. Especially in the preschool stage, an increasing number of children with special needs are beginning to receive education in mainstream kindergartens. This change is related to both the development of the concept of educational equity and the promotion of national policies.

The “14th Five-Year Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education” proposes to expand the coverage of inclusive education and improve the inclusive education capacity of ordinary schools and kindergartens. The “Outline for the Development of Children in China (2021-2030)” also emphasizes the need to promote the access of children with disabilities to inclusive preschool education. From a policy perspective, preschool inclusive education has gradually shifted from “advocacy requirements” to “institutional direction”. [7,8]

Compared to compulsory education, the foundation for implementing inclusive preschool education remains relatively weak. Although many regular kindergartens have begun to try to accept children with special needs, problems such as insufficient teacher professional competence, weak curriculum adaptability, superficial home-school cooperation, and a lack of professional support resources are still prevalent in the actual educational process.

More importantly, current discussions on inclusive preschool education still largely focus on whether or not to accept children with special needs, while research on how to provide ongoing support for children with special needs after they enter mainstream kindergartens remains insufficient.

In fact, the entry of special needs children into the general education environment does not mean that integration has truly occurred. Inclusive education involves not only the “shared presence” in space, but also multiple aspects such as curriculum participation, peer interaction, teacher support and social adaptation. [2]

Therefore, discussing inclusive preschool education solely from an institutional or ideological perspective often fails to explain the complexities of practice. The development of children with special needs is itself the result of the interaction of different environmental systems. Teacher attitudes, family structures, preschool culture, social resources, and educational policies are not independent but constantly interacting. Ecosystem theory provides a suitable analytical perspective for understanding this interaction. Bronfenbrenner argues that child development is always nested within a multi-layered environmental system, including the microsystem that children directly interact with, the intermediate system that connects different environments, the external system that children do not directly participate in but still influence, and the macrosystem constituted by socio-cultural factors and policies.

For preschool inclusive education, the development of special children is also affected by multiple environmental factors. The attitude of teachers in the class, the acceptance of ordinary children, the participation of families, professional support resources and social education concepts will jointly affect the implementation effect of inclusive education. Based on this perspective, this article analyzes the current problems in the support system for preschool inclusive education by combining the case of a private kindergarten in Chongqing that carried out inclusive education. [3]

2. Case Background and Research Process

The case discussed in this article comes from the practice of preschool inclusive education in a private kindergarten in Chongqing.

The kindergarten began enrolling students in 2008 and admitted two special needs children to regular classes for the first time at the start of the new semester. One child was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy with mild intellectual disability; the other

child had significant developmental delays, but the parents did not provide complete medical diagnostic information. Both children were placed in the kindergarten's Montessori mixed-age class. Researchers entered the kindergarten as special education supporters and conducted continuous observation of the implementation process of inclusive education through classroom observation, teacher interviews, participation in teaching activities, and daily tracking records. The study lasted for about three months. [1]

During the research, the researchers focused on the following aspects: the adaptation of children with special needs after entering kindergarten, the practical difficulties teachers face in classroom teaching, the interaction between typical and special needs children, the level of home-school cooperation, and the intervention methods of external professional resources. Unlike some idealized cases of inclusive education, this kindergarten is not a dedicated pilot kindergarten for inclusive education, nor does it have dedicated resource teachers. Therefore, the problems it encountered in promoting inclusive education reflect the current reality of inclusive preschool education in ordinary kindergartens.

3. Integration Dilemmas in Microsystems: Teacher, Peer, and Classroom Interaction

In ecosystem theory, the microsystems primarily refer to the environment in which children directly participate and interact, including family, classroom, and peer relationships. For children with special needs, the kindergarten classroom constitutes their most direct integration environment. Therefore, teacher attitudes, peer interactions, and classroom organization methods directly influence a child's adaptation to group life. In the case kindergarten, both children with special needs exhibited significant adaptation problems in the early stages of their enrollment.

One child cried incessantly and pinched others. The homeroom teacher mentioned in an interview that she initially didn't know how to handle this behavior and could only intervene by hugging, comforting, and diverting the child's attention. Another child, who had six fingers on his left hand, was avoided by some of the other children in the early days of kindergarten. During one outdoor activity, the other children clearly didn't want to hold his hand. Instead of giving the children a formal lecture, the teacher proactively took the child's hand and organized a game in a more natural way. Afterward, the other children's avoidance of the child gradually decreased. This detail reflects that in the preschool stage, the attitudes of other children towards their special needs peers are largely influenced by the teacher's behavior.

Preschool children have not yet formed stable social judgment standards. Their understanding of "normal" and "special" often comes from the attitudes expressed by teachers in daily interactions. If teachers continue to regard special children as "problems" or "trouble", ordinary children are also likely to form similar cognitions. Therefore, at the micro-system level, teachers not only undertake teaching functions, but also shape the social relationships within the class. However, in the research process, the problem of teacher stress is also very prominent. [6]

Researchers initially attempted to assist teachers in developing individualized education plans, hoping to integrate the developmental goals of children with special needs into daily teaching activities. For example, they added language training, rule awareness cultivation, and sensory integration activities to the existing curriculum, and required teachers to keep classroom observation records. However, after

implementation, teachers' workload increased significantly. The original classroom teaching tasks did not decrease, and with the addition of children with special needs, teachers not only needed to maintain overall classroom order but also needed to pay extra attention to the behavioral problems of these children and the implementation of individualized activities.

One teacher mentioned in an interview, "It's not that I'm unwilling to do it, but I simply don't have any extra time each day." This phenomenon indicates that many current discussions about "improving teachers' inclusive education capabilities" often overlook the teachers' actual working environment. While insufficient professional competence among teachers is certainly a problem, the lack of resource teachers, the lack of professional team support, and the continuously increasing workload mean that even with relevant training, teachers may not be able to maintain high-quality inclusive teaching in the long term. At the same time, classroom teaching methods themselves also affect the participation of children with special needs. Researchers have observed that some classroom activities still primarily take the form of "teacher explanation—children repetition," with weak interactivity. Even typically developing children struggle to maintain attention for extended periods, let alone children with special needs.

Therefore, the "attention problems" of special needs children in the classroom are not entirely due to individual defects of the children, but are also closely related to the way the classroom is organized.

4. Disruptions in the Intermediate System: Issues of Home-School Cooperation and Support Coordination

From the perspective of ecosystem theory, pre-school inclusive education is not something that can be accomplished solely by the kindergarten. It is the result of the joint action of multiple systems. The development of special children in a regular kindergarten is influenced not only by the micro-environment such as the teaching methods of teachers and the relationships among peers, but also by the participation of families, the management of the kindergarten, professional support resources, and the social policy environment. Therefore, the construction of the inclusive education support system should not merely focus on adjustments at the classroom level, but need to re-establish collaborative relationships at different levels.

(1). At the micro-system level, efforts should be made to enhance teachers' ability to support special children and improve the interaction environment in the class. Teachers are not only the implementers of the curriculum but also the organizers of children's social relationships. How teachers understand special children and how they guide ordinary children to develop an accepting attitude will directly affect the implementation effect of inclusive education. Therefore, teacher training should not only emphasize the input of theoretical knowledge, but also need to combine real classroom situations to improve teachers' practical abilities in behavior support, differentiated teaching, and organization of peer interactions.

(2). At the intermediate system level, the collaboration between families and the kindergarten should be strengthened. Currently, many parent-child cooperation still remains at the stage of simple information feedback, lacking true educational collaboration. In the future, based on the actual situation of special children's families, more flexible cooperation mechanisms should be established. For example, for families with grandparents raising children, oral communication, demonstration

guidance, etc. can be used instead of complex written feedback to lower the threshold for family participation.

(3). At the external system level, efforts should be made to establish stable cooperation between ordinary kindergartens and rehabilitation institutions, hospitals, universities, and community resources. Currently, many professional support measures still have a temporary nature, and teachers often lack continuous guidance when encountering problems. Establishing regional integrated educational resource centers, a system of visiting guidance teachers, and an entry mechanism for professional teams in kindergartens can help enhance the support capabilities of ordinary kindergartens.

Finally, at the macro system level, it is necessary to further improve the institutional guarantee for inclusive education, including teacher staffing, financial subsidies, professional resource allocation, and evaluation mechanisms for inclusive education. Only when the construction of the system, professional support, and educational practice form a stable linkage can early childhood inclusive education gradually shift from individual kindergarten explorations to a more regular development state. [4]

5. Resource Gaps in External Systems: Professional Support is Difficult To Sustainably Reach Kindergartens

In ecosystem theory, the external system refers to the social environment in which children, though not directly involved, influence their development, such as professional institutions, community resources, and educational support systems.

During the research, the researchers learned that while rehabilitation institutions and special education resources existed in the area where the kindergarten was located, these resources lacked stable partnerships with regular kindergartens. As special education students at a university, the researchers could only provide support at fixed times each week. Many classroom issues could not be addressed in real time, forcing teachers to rely on their own experience. One teacher remarked, “If you were here every day, many problems would be easier to solve.” This phenomenon reflects the current temporary and fragmented nature of professional support in inclusive preschool education. Many regular kindergartens lack dedicated resource teachers and long-term, stable professional team support. Special education resources often remain at the level of “short-term training” or “phased guidance,” failing to truly integrate into the daily educational process. Simultaneously, there is a lack of effective collaboration between rehabilitation institutions, hospitals, and community resources. The performance of children with special needs in kindergartens often fails to provide timely feedback to rehabilitation training; and the training programs developed by rehabilitation institutions may not be effectively integrated with kindergarten educational activities. This means that different systems that should support each other are, in reality, relatively separated.

6. Institutional Tension in the Macro System: The Gap Between Ideological Advancement and Real-World Conditions

The macro system mainly involves socio-cultural concepts, education policies, and the institutional environment.

In recent years, my country’s policy support for inclusive education has been continuously strengthened, and “educational equity” and “universal education” have

gradually become important educational concepts. However, at the practical level, there is still a significant gap between the speed of concept implementation and the actual capacity for support. Currently, many ordinary kindergartens have begun to try to accept children with special needs, but resource allocation, teacher training, and the construction of support systems have not yet been improved in tandem. Some teachers, while agreeing with the concept of inclusive education, still worry about their own lack of ability; some parents of ordinary children, while supporting educational equity, still worry about children with special needs disrupting classroom order. These contradictions actually reflect that inclusive education has entered a stage where “a consensus on the concept is gradually forming, but the practical system is not yet mature.” In this context, it is difficult to maintain high-quality inclusive education in the long term by relying solely on the efforts of kindergartens or individual teachers.

Therefore, the construction of a support system for inclusive preschool education needs to further promote the integration of professional resources from the institutional level. For example, by establishing regional resource centers, a system of itinerant instructors, and a cooperation mechanism with universities, continuous support can be provided to ordinary kindergartens. At the same time, the content related to inclusive preschool education should also be added to the teacher training system so that ordinary kindergarten teachers can have basic special education skills. [5]

7. Conclusions

Analysis of the case study kindergarten reveals that many problems in inclusive preschool education are not caused by a single aspect, but rather by the interaction of different systems. There is a clear correlation between teacher stress, curriculum difficulties, limited home-school cooperation, and a lack of professional resources. Ecosystem theory is applicable to inclusive preschool education not only because it provides a theoretical framework, but more importantly, because it explains why the development of children with special needs is consistently influenced by multiple networks of relationships. In the case study, the principal's educational philosophy facilitated the enrollment of children with special needs, teachers strived to maintain classroom order, parents hoped their children would be placed in a mainstream environment, and researchers attempted to provide professional support. These factors collectively constitute the real-world ecosystem of children with special needs' development. However, at the same time, problems such as excessive teacher workload, limited family education capabilities, and unstable professional support consistently affect the quality of inclusive education implementation.

Therefore, the future development focus of inclusive preschool education should not be limited to expanding access to preschool for children with special needs, but should further address the issue of building a support system. Only when a more stable collaborative relationship is formed between teachers, families, preschools, and external professional resources can inclusive education truly shift from “formal entry” to “effective participation.”

Conflicts of Interest

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

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