

Barriers to Effective Inclusive Education in Primary School in China: Perspectives from Teaching Practice

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Abstract:

Inclusive education is steadily developing and has achieved some results in China, but there are also many barriers, such as insufficient teacher capacity for inclusive education, insufficient school resource support, and difficulties in communicating with parents. These barriers are particularly evident in underdeveloped provinces, which constrain the development level of inclusive education in the local area and are detrimental to educational equity. This study conducted interviews with 15 teachers from 3 ordinary schools in Guizhou Province in China. Through thematic analysis, the results were obtained from three aspects: teaching practice, barriers faced, and solutions. In terms of teaching practice and the obstacles faced, there are significant problems such as insufficient level of inclusive education, insufficient personalized education, communication difficulties, inadequate management of behavioral norms, and lack of resources for teachers. Teachers overcome these obstacles through self-improvement, diversified teaching methods, emotional communication, and seeking external help, with good results.

Keywords:

Inclusive education
Teaching practice
Primary school
Interviews

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1. Introduction

In 1994, UNESCO first proposed inclusive education at the World Conference on Special Needs Education, which is a new educational trend advocated by the international community. Inclusive education requires that any school has an obligation to enroll any child in its jurisdiction and provide them with education suitable for their physical and mental health development^[1]. Based on this, through unremitting efforts and development, China has made significant improvements in the development level, teaching conditions, and teaching efficiency of inclusive

education^[1]. To promote the high-quality development of special education, China has provided sufficient support for the cultivation and development of inclusive education for teachers.

At the same time, there are theoretical and practical gaps in relevant research both domestically and internationally. For example, the existing inclusive education program system is not perfect. In terms of practical gaps, many ordinary teachers lack sufficient understanding of the relevant theories of inclusive education teaching due to various reasons, resulting in a

lack of knowledge on how to deal with various problems arising from special needs children in teaching practice. Especially for ordinary schoolteachers in remote areas, their understanding of educational theory and teaching practice are disconnected under limited conditions ^[2].

This study investigated the problems of inclusive education in China from the perspective of teaching practice and proposed corresponding solutions. Three research questions were answered: “What are the current teaching practices of primary school teachers in handling inclusive education?”; “What are the barriers faced of the primary school teachers in handling inclusive education?”; “How do primary school teachers overcome the barriers in inclusive education?”. The conclusions of this study offer practical guidance for primary school teachers by presenting specific, actionable strategies to improve their teaching methods. These strategies can help teachers better address the diverse learning needs of their students, enhance teaching effectiveness, and strengthen their professional competence in the field of inclusive education. This may make them more competitive in terms of career advancement or professional recognition. Special students can receive more appropriate support, and ordinary students can also cultivate a sense of tolerance and cooperation in a more inclusive learning environment, which also helps to improve students’ learning efficiency ^[3].

2. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research method. Based on the research aids of this study, the main tasks were to understand the current teaching practices of primary school teachers, the barriers faced of primary teachers and the strategies of primary school teachers overcome the barriers. Since these tasks do not involve quantitative relationships or assumptions, interviews are the most appropriate method to accomplish them. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is more suitable ^[4].

Interviews have been conducted in 3 public ordinary primary schools in Guizhou Province of China. The core criteria for selecting schools include three. One is the geographical coverage and level of economic development. Regions with different levels of economic development were selected to reflect the impact of urban-rural differences on the allocation of inclusive education resources. The

second is the type of school ^[5]. All three schools are ordinary public primary schools, not special education schools or key prestigious schools, with a moderate scale, and schools that have accepted special students. Students with special needs have been enrolled in these schools, and teachers have attached importance to inclusive education and have gained some teaching experience. In the three schools, 15 teachers have been selected using random sampling techniques to conduct interviews, which means 5 teachers have been selected in each school. The teachers as participants met three conditions: having a bachelor’s degree or above, having teaching experience of inclusive education for more than 1 year, and participated in teacher training of inclusive education, but not having an education background in major of special education ^[6].

The interview instrument adopted a self-designed “Lived experiences of primary school teachers handling children with special needs” as the outline, which includes 4 parts. The first part is personal information, including sex, age, educational background, etc., for statistical analysis. The second part is current teaching practices in inclusive education. The third part is the barriers faced by primary school teachers in inclusive education. The fourth part is about overcoming barriers by primary school teachers in inclusive education. The interview outline is semi-structured, and the questions listed above are only intended to prompt researchers to moderately limit the scope of the conversation during the interview process and are not intended to limit or prompt the participants’ speech content. Interview data is in textual form, so this study used thematic analysis to analyze them ^[7].

3. Results

In the interviews, four questions were used to discuss the current teaching practices of primary school teachers. According to the teaching practice theory, the quality of teaching practice can be divided into classroom culture, instruction, and socioemotional skills ^[8]. So, there are a total of 60 answers from 15 participants, themed as follows in **Table 1**.

There are a total of 45 answers discuss the barriers faced of the primary school teachers can be themed as follows in **Table 2**.

There are a total of 60 answers discussing strategies to overcome barriers can be themed as follows, in **Table 3**.

Table 1. Themes of current teaching practices

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant	Example
Creation of classroom culture	Creating an inclusive environment	T7	Creating an inclusive atmosphere is very important. Organizing class meetings and other methods can guide students to accept special students.
		T12	Select educational partners for special needs children, who can provide guidance and assistance in their academic studies.
	Behavior management	T2	Provide appropriate rewards to special students to encourage their good behavior, which can be material or spiritual, such as snacks or verbal praise.
		T8	Use specific and direct guidance methods to help them understand classroom rules.
Conduction of instruction	Adjustment of teaching	T1	Simplifying or enriching teaching content to better meet the cognitive level of special students can also help enhance their confidence in learning.
		T7	We developed an IEP based on the different needs and characteristics of students, to provide them with more targeted teaching support.
	Auxiliary teaching methods	T14	Involve all students in the classroom, such as using gamified and cooperative learning, to ensure that every child can learn knowledge.
		T8	Utilize assistive technology and teaching aids to help students better understand and master knowledge.
	Communication and feedback	T6	Communicate with students, parents, and superiors to understand feedback on teaching and learn from others' good practices and obtain more resources.
		T13	Observe classroom reactions after classes to identify my shortcomings and then make progress by searching for information with colleagues.
The promotion of socioemotional skills	Emotional management	T4	Create a harmonious classroom atmosphere that respects, appreciates, and encourages special students.
		T15	Teach special students simple emotional regulation methods. When they feel anxious or nervous, guide them to calm their body and emotions.
	Improvement of socioemotional skills	T2	Encourage students not to be afraid and encourage them to boldly try to participate in the class.
		T12	Praise special children based on their situation to enhance their self-esteem and desire for expression.

Table 2. Themes of barriers faced of the primary school teachers

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant	Example
The barriers in classroom culture	Teachers lack professional knowledge	T1	The differences between students with different backgrounds and abilities are significant and difficult to balance.
		T3	The lack of professional knowledge and skills makes me feel helpless when facing many special students.
	Insufficient external support	T7	Implementing inclusive education requires sufficient teacher resources and teaching support, but there is often a shortage of teachers and resources.
		T8	Parents of ordinary students do not agree, fearing that the presence of special students may affect their children's learning.
	Communication difficulties	T6	The difficulty in communication is very high, especially for children with cognitive impairments, who I cannot communicate smoothly with.
The barriers in instruction	Limited teaching level in inclusive education	T4	Special students have different types and levels of disabilities, so their educational needs are also different, and sometimes it is impossible to balance them.
		T7	Due to the personalized and diverse needs of special students, it is difficult to find customized educational methods that are suitable for them.
	Insufficient resources and support	T1	Developing a suitable teaching plan for each special student requires time and professional knowledge, but the workload is heavy.
		T8	Not all parents support teachers using new educational methods due to parental obstruction.
	Inefficient communication	T2	Because these students are quite special, they also believe that they are different from others, so they dare not express their inner thoughts.
		T3	Establishing effective communication channels with students with language, hearing, or cognitive impairments is a major challenge.

Table 2 (Continued)

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant	Example
The barriers in the socioemotional skills	Insufficient professional competence of teachers	T1	It is very difficult for me to accurately identify and understand the emotional needs and trigger points of special students.
		T5	The barriers in supporting the emotional well-being of special needs students include understanding their unique needs, building trust relationships...
	Communicative disorders	T3	For example, students with autism have very limited and simple language, making it difficult to understand their true thoughts.
		T8	The lack of communication among students is a great challenge, and special students rarely express their emotions to the outside world.
	Time and energy are limited	T4	The workload is heavy, and there is no energy to take care of the emotions of special students.
		T6	Special students require more patience and careful care than ordinary students, but because of the lack of time, I am unable to pay attention to their emotions.

Table 3. Themes of strategies overcome barriers

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant	Example
The strategies in creation of classroom culture	Self-improvement and encouragement	T1	Continuously learning and researching the best practices for integrating educational classroom culture and applying them to my teaching.
		T3	Build confidence in myself and continuously improve my abilities through learning.
	Seeking support	T12	Inquire with parents about the basic situation of special needs children, search for information to fully understand their needs, and comfort parents' concerns about their children.
		T11	...collaborating with colleagues, gradually creating an inclusive classroom culture that is suitable for all students.
The strategies in conduction of instruction	Teaching adjustments	T1	By providing learning activities of different difficulty levels and levels, ensure that each student can make progress at their own level of ability.
		T11	I have found that...providing multiple learning paths are particularly effective, as these strategies help students with different abilities to participate and progress.
	Auxiliary teaching methods	T2	Encouraging students to form small groups, sharing weal and woe, and helping each other can fully stimulate their learning enthusiasm.
		T6	Develop special reward and punishment mechanisms and strictly enforce them.
The strategies in socioemotional skills	Organize collective activities	T5	I organized group cooperative games, role-playing, and peer assistance to help children establish friendships and improve social skills through interaction.
		T7	Create common interests, form interest groups, and cultivate a sense of mutual assistance within the group.
	Daily interaction	T10	Encourage ordinary students to help special needs students and encourage them to bravely express themselves.
		T6	Treat students without discrimination, communicate patiently with them, observe their behavior, and only give fair judgments when problems arise.

4. Discussion

According to the results of interviews, the current teaching practices of primary school teachers in inclusive education can be discussed as follows: Firstly, understanding special students is an important prerequisite. The participants repeatedly answered the importance of understanding special children in every

domain of the questions. Without understanding special children, it is impossible to create a suitable classroom culture. Secondly, the quality of individualized teaching is not good enough. From the responses of the participants, it was found that the teacher adjusted the teaching content, pace, and format for special students to better adapt their learning abilities^[9]. In addition, peer assistance

and collaboration are widely adopted by teachers. Participants all expressed that they have adopted methods such as “peer support,” “cooperative learning,” “group activity,” and “encouraging cooperation” to complete teaching practices of inclusive education. Furthermore, there is a lack of rules for emotional and behavioral management. The participants have a consistent approach to creating classroom rules for special students and strategies for managing their emotional issues, with a focus on attention, encouragement, and praise. As well, homeschool communication is an important way to obtain support. Parents of students are both supervisors and supporters of education ^[10]. Some participants chose to obtain support from parents of special students by maintaining communication. Moreover, there is a serious lack of school resource support. As an important teaching resource, assistive devices can bring a lot of convenience to the learning and life of special students, as well as teaching aids, toys, and training equipment specially designed for special children’s deficiencies.

Barriers faced of primary school teachers can be discussed as follows: Firstly, insufficient ability of teachers to provide inclusive education. Secondly, difficulty communicating with special students and student’s parents. Thirdly, insufficient resource support from schools. Participants in the interviews generally expressed that schools provide insufficient resource support for inclusive education ^[11].

Strategies to overcome barriers can be discussed as follows: First, self-improvement. Self-improvement is the answer given by most participants, and it is also the fundamental strategy to address the insufficient capacity of teachers in inclusive education ^[12]. Second, adopting diverse teaching methods. Adopting diverse teaching methods is also a form of self-improvement, but it is

more focused on overcoming the challenges faced at present, and self-improvement is long-term and slow. Third, engage in emotional communication with students’ parents. Communication is an art and one of the essential skills for a teacher. In inclusive education, teachers need to maintain close communication with students’ parents and obtain the necessary information. Fourth, seek help from leaders and colleagues. One person’s power is limited, and inclusive education should not be the task of teachers alone. As an inclusive teacher, it is essential to learn how to seek help from leaders and colleagues and actively engage in teamwork ^[13].

5. Conclusion

On current teaching practices in inclusive education, the creation of classroom culture, the accessible environment, and the diverse assistance provided by teachers for special students are important elements. The insufficient professional knowledge and skills of teachers, inadequate support from ordinary students and parents, insufficient educational resources, and difficulties in communicating with special needs students are the main barriers faced in inclusive education ^[14]. In overcoming the barriers, classroom culture creation, the improvement of teachers’ own abilities, encouragement of ordinary students by teachers, communication between teachers and parents, and seeking help from leaders and peers are all effective strategies. According to the interview results, the use of strategies provided guidance for teachers and allowed students to make significant progress. At the same time, it is also necessary to continuously improve in maintaining learning, seeking support, and adjusting individualized education and teaching plans ^[15].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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