
The Historical Development and Characteristics of Inclusive Education in China

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Abstract

This study reviews and summarizes the history of inclusive education in China and divides its historical development into four stages: the embryonic stage of localization of inclusive education (1978-1989); the initial stage of institutionalization of inclusive education (1990-2005); the reflective promotion stage of inclusive education (2006-2013); and the deepening transformation stage of inclusive education (2014 to present). Based on this reflection and summary, the development characteristics of inclusive education in China are obtained: the development of inclusive education is rooted in Chinese traditional culture; the scale of special education subjects faced by inclusive education is huge; inclusive education occurs when the support capacity of special schools and the acceptance conditions of ordinary schools are insufficient; the development of inclusive education is towards a "multi-model;" and Chinese-style inclusive education presents the characteristics of dual tracks of special education schools and ordinary schools. By sorting out the history of inclusive education in China and summarizing its characteristics, the experience of the localization development of inclusive education in China is obtained.

Keywords: China, Inclusive Education, History, Characteristics

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is an educational concept and practice model that aims to meet the educational needs of all students (including those with special educational needs) so that they can receive education in a general education environment while having equal educational opportunities (Piao, 1996). In 1994, the Salamanca Declaration proposed inclusive education and elaborated on the importance of inclusive education (Li, 2022). Today, inclusive education has become the core principle followed by the development of special education around the world and has played a key role in promoting educational equality

and quality improvement. China also actively promoted and innovated inclusive education in the field of special education in the 1980s, but unlike Western countries to meet the diverse needs of all students. The development of inclusive education in China was to popularize and improve the level of special education. China's localized exploration of inclusive education not only reflects the vivid practice of the concept of inclusive education in different countries but also makes important contributions to the development of global inclusive education. However, China's inclusive education is different from the world in terms of concept and implementation. This study aims to review the historical development of inclusive education in China, reveal its uniqueness, and provide a reference for other countries.

2. Research objectives

The present study aims:

1. To examine the historical development of inclusive education in China.
2. To identify and analyze the unique characteristics of China's inclusive education model.

3. Research method

3.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework Construction

Before studying inclusive education in China, one must first systematically review domestic and foreign literature on inclusive education, sort out academic journals, policy documents and other materials; and understand the theoretical basis, development process, and practice model. Combined with the actual situation of special education in China, the researcher constructs a theoretical framework and clarifies the research perspective and method.

3.2. Collection and Organization of Historical Data

The research must systematically sort out the development of inclusive education in China since the reform and opening up, collect historical data. This data includes sources such as policy documents, policy coverage, student participation rates laws and regulations, important legal documents such as the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, and special education policies issued by the government. At the same time, the study should collect data on special education schools, such as including education pilot projects, and sort out the phased characteristics and key events.

3.3. Phase Division and Characteristic Analysis

Based on historical data, China's inclusive education is divided into four stages: the embryonic stage of localization (1978-1989), the initial stage of institutionalization (1990-2005), the reflective promotion stage (2006-2013) and the deepening transformation stage (2014 to present). The method's aim is to further analyze the policy background, main measures, practical achievements and problems of each stage to reveal the characteristics and development trends.

3.4. Field research and Case Analysis

This research method selects representative regions and schools, conducts field research; interviews educational administrators, teachers, students and parents; and understands the operation, challenges and successful experiences of inclusive education. At the same time, it selects some pilot projects and special education schools as study cases, in order to deeply analyze their practices in model exploration, resource support and education quality improvement, and provide empirical support.

3.5. Feature Summary and Comparative Analysis

Based on sorting out the historical development context, the method summarizes the unique characteristics of China's inclusive education, and analyzes its particularity in areas such as cultural foundation, practice model, and policy orientation. At the same time, it compares its findings with Western countries, explores the differences in concepts, the implementation of paths and effects, and reveals localized characteristics.

3.6. Discussion and Outlook

Combined with the research results, this paper discusses the historical research and characteristics of China's inclusive education in depth, analyzes the similarities and differences between the existing research and this study in terms of stage division and feature summary, and explores the development of experience and lessons. On this basis, it looks forward to the future developmental trend of China's inclusive education and puts forward policy recommendations and practical directions for improving the inclusive education system and improving the quality of education.

Through the above steps, this study has systematically sorted out the historical development context of China's inclusive education, has deeply analyzed its unique characteristics, and has provided theoretical support and practical reference for promoting the localization development of China's inclusive education.

4. Results

4.1. The Historical Development of Inclusive Education in China

This study divides the evolution of inclusive education in China into four stages as follows:

4.1.1. The Embryonic Stage of Localization of Inclusive Education (1978-1989)

In 1978, China entered a new era of reform and opening, during which the exploration of localized inclusive education began. However, the localized inclusive education during this period was only to solve the problem of difficulties for disabled children to enter ordinary schools.

The development of inclusive education is inseparable from the development of special education and education at other stages. First, the 1982 *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (revised) included the education of people with disabilities in the fundamental laws of the country, and this attention is rare internationally (National People's Congress, 1982). The 1985 *Decision of the CPC Central Committee on the Reform of the Education System* emphasized the importance of developing special education for the blind, deaf, dumb, disabled and mentally retarded children. This policy marked the beginning of the state's responsibility for special education for the disabled, laying the foundation for the further development of inclusive education (CPC Central Committee, 1985). The 1986 *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* also mentioned the right of disabled children to receive education and focused on guaranteeing the education of disabled people in the form of special schools (National People's Congress, 1986). However, in view of the reality that special schools are unable to meet the needs of many disabled children, the "Golden Key Blind Children Education Program" inclusive education experiment has established a way for disabled children to attend ordinary schools (Xu, 1987). In 1986, *The Opinions on Several Issues Concerning the Implementation of the Compulsory Education Law* confirmed for the first time in an official document that children with disabilities have the right to attend regular schools, marking the beginning of inclusive education in China (General Office of the State Council, 1986). In 1987, the phrase "Learning in regular classrooms" appeared for the first time in a national policy document in *The Teaching Plan for Full-time Schools for the Mentally Retarded (Classes)* (National Board of Education, 1987). In 1988, the Regulations of *The People's Republic of China on the Education of Persons with Disabilities* established "an inclusive education pattern with special schools as the backbone, special education classes in regular schools and disabled children 'learning in regular classrooms' as the main body" (State Council, 1988). This localized inclusive education development model was subsequently formally recognized in relevant national documents. Subsequently, pilot projects for inclusive education were launched nationwide, and trials and promotion were carried out in an orderly, targeted and organized manner.

In short, during this period, China formulated policy goals to ensure that people with disabilities were to enjoy the right to education. To increase the enrollment rate of children with disabilities, and in addition to special education schools as the main placement method, it also pioneered a model of inclusive education. Thus, the dual-track system of special education and inclusive education has begun to show results. Although the detailed policies and management system of inclusive education have not yet been fully established, this marks China's initial exploration of inclusive education. However, at that time, inclusive education was mainly regarded as an economic, practical and feasible solution to the problem of education for children with disabilities in the country. At that time, more than 80% of disabled students in China were enrolled in special education schools, and segregated schools were still the main form of educational placement for children with disabilities.

4.1.2. The initial Stage of Institutionalization of Inclusive Education (1990-2005)

During this stage, China emphasized the improvement of the legal system and ushered in the era of institutionalization of inclusive education. During this period, the scale of inclusive education was expanded; and inspired by the international inclusive education concept, China's inclusive education teaching concept also underwent profound changes.

In 1990, *The Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities* clearly defined the responsibilities and status of general education institutions in the education of persons with disabilities (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990). In 1991, *The Outline of the Eighth Five-Year Plan for China's Disability Affairs* further emphasized the obligation of general education to educate persons with disabilities (State Council, 1991). In 1994, *The Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities* (State Council, 1994) and the 1996 *Implementation Plan for the Ninth Five-Year Plan for Compulsory Education of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities* (National Board of Education, & China Disabled Persons' Federation, 1996) both put "Learning in regular classrooms" in regular schools at the top of the compulsory education forms for persons with disabilities. Together with special education classes and special education schools, they constituted the three main models. The 1994 *Trial Measures for the Implementation of Inclusive Education for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities* made clear and detailed provisions on how to carry out inclusive education, which is a strong guarantee for the implementation of inclusive education in China (Ministry of Education, 1994). During this period, the government emphasized the need to vigorously promote inclusive education and significantly increase the enrollment rate of compulsory education for children and young people with disabilities.

In addition, this period was greatly influenced by Western special education. In 1994, *The Salamanca Declaration* formally proposed the concept of inclusive education, which had a profound impact on the development of inclusive education in China and the world (UNESCO, 1994). In addition, the focus of the Fifth International Conference on Special Education in 2000 was on inclusive education, with the title "Inclusion of the Excluded" (IASE, 2000). Chinese education scholars have continuously written articles to introduce and promote the concept of Chinese inclusive education and believe that China should include Chinese inclusive education in the scope of world inclusive education.

Subsequently, the Third National Conference on Special Education in 2001 announced that a new pattern of compulsory education for children and adolescents with disabilities, with "learning in regular classrooms" as the main body and special education schools as the backbone, had been basically formed (Li, 2001). In 2003, the *Notice on the Establishment of Experimental Counties (Districts) for the Establishment of a Support and Guarantee System for Inclusive Education* brought China's inclusive education pilot work to a climax. The pilot work during this period provided certain policy support and

guarantees for the in-depth, sustained and high-quality development of China's inclusive education (Ministry of Education, 2003).

During this stage, while the scale of inclusive education has grown rapidly, the quality of education has become very serious. Phenomena such as "sitting in class" and "studying in class together" are common. In addition, underdeveloped regions do not invest enough in special education, and the development of education at the preschool, high school, and tertiary levels of education for special students is still relatively slow. In short, inclusive education needs to be adjusted and strengthened in terms of inclusion, quality and fairness.

4.1.3. The Reflective Promotion Stage of Inclusive Education (2006-2013)

This period can be classified as one with the previous period, but the difference is that this period faced more institutionalized, real problems. The concept, system and practice of inclusive education have been constantly improving, and the government and society have increased their efforts to reflect on and solve existing problems.

The 2006 *Compulsory Education Law (revised)* clearly defined "Learning in regular classrooms" in ordinary schools as an important form of education for special children in the form of a major education law (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2006). The 2006 *Measures for the Administration of Special Funds Subsidized by the Central Government for Minority Education and Special Education* (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education, 2006) and the 2007 *Plan for the Construction of Special Education Schools in Central and Western Regions during the 11th Five-Year Plan Period (2008-2010)* (Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, 2007) strengthened the construction of special education schools in underdeveloped areas, which also promoted the development of inclusive education as a side benefit. In 2008, China formally approved and joined the international *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, marking the official opening of a new era of rights-based disability work in China. The development foundation of inclusive education has become more solid, but which also means that China needs to make more institutional changes and foster greater inclusiveness (State Council, 2008). The 2008 *Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (revised)* added new provisions such as prohibiting discrimination based on disability and providing more financial aid to students with disabilities, effectively protecting the right of students with disabilities to receive education (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2008). The 2009 *Opinions on Further Accelerating the Development of Special Education*, as a special policy for the education of people with disabilities, highlights the concepts of publicity and inclusiveness, and accelerates the construction of a supportive and guaranteed system for inclusive education (General Office of the State Council, 2009).

Although inclusive education has consistently reflected on various issues during this period, there are still many problems. First, the scale of inclusive education shrank, and the proportion of special students in inclusive education dropped from 64.8% in 2007 to a low of 51.8% in 2013 (Pang, 2020). This is related to the pragmatic orientation of China's inclusive education and the lack of a profound inclusive education culture. In addition, since various special students are still facing the situation of being "rejected" from admission, different social groups such as students and parents during this period have used various activities to appeal for their needs, which has also become an important force for the exposure of inclusive education problems and the promotion of change.

4.1.4. The Deepening Transformation Stage of Inclusive Education (2014 to Present)

In the new era, a series of policies and major measures on inclusive education have been introduced, and inclusive education has made important progress in terms of all stages of education, inclusion, fairness, and quality.

During this period, inclusive education was officially established as the development direction of education for people with disabilities in China, as evidenced by the following policies. First, the three phases of the *Special Education Improvement Plan* (hereinafter referred to as the "Improvement Plan") in 2014, 2017, and 2021 proposed to vigorously develop inclusive education. Secondly, the 2016 *13th Five-Year Plan for Accelerating the Well-off Process of People with Disabilities* also mentioned inclusive education many times (State Council, 2016). Then, the 2017 *Regulations on Education for People with Disabilities (revised)* established the institutional framework of inclusive education through legislation (State Council, 2017). Finally, the 2018 *China Education Modernization 2035* shows that promoting inclusive education has become the development direction and main goal of the country's special education modernization (CPC Central Committee, State Council, 2018).

The shift and improvement of policies have enabled more disabled students to receive education. Since 2014, the number of disabled students in school has shown a rapid growth trend, among which the number and proportion of students "learning in regular classrooms" in ordinary schools have gradually recovered. While the scale has grown, the quality of inclusive education has also received much attention. First, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to run special education well, which foreshadowed the emphasis on education quality. Secondly, the third phase of the "Promotion Plan" issued a series of policy measures to strengthen the construction of a supportive and guaranteed system for inclusive education. Then, in 2014, the *Notice on the Construction of Special Education Comprehensive Reform Pilot Zones Nationwide* focused on establishing a sound leadership and overall coordination mechanism for regional inclusive education through comprehensive education reform (Ministry of Education, 2014). Subsequently, in 2016, the Ministry of Education issued compulsory education curriculum standards for three types of special education schools, clearly focusing on the goal of students' learning outcomes (W. Pang, 2020). In 2017, the *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Education System and Mechanism* further promoted inclusive education as an important part of the education system reform (General Office of the CPC Central Committee, General Office of the State Council, 2017). In 2018, the *Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Doing a Good Job in the Enrollment of Ordinary Primary and Secondary Schools* further deepened the work of inclusive education and placement of children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2018). In 2020, the *Guiding*

Opinions on Strengthening the Work of Inclusive Education for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Compulsory Education put forward many detailed provisions to improve the quality of inclusive education (Ministry of Education, China Disabled Persons' Federation, 2020).

In addition, inclusive education in non-compulsory education has achieved substantial results. First, inclusive education for disabled people in universities has made a breakthrough. In 2014, blind people took the National College Entrance Examination for the first time. Subsequently, the 2015 *Regulations on the Management of Disabled People Taking the National Unified College Entrance Examination* provided equal opportunities for disabled people to take the college entrance examination (Ministry of Education, 2015). Since then, pilot work on inclusive education for disabled people in high schools has been vigorously carried out. Secondly, high school departments of special education schools have continued to emerge, and ordinary high schools and secondary vocational schools have also accepted more disabled students. At the same time, the state provides 12 years of free education for disabled children from families with financial difficulties. In 2018, *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Vocational Education for Persons with Disabilities* constructed an integrated development model for vocational education of the disabled (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2018). Finally, the 2024 *Preschool Education Law* has made specific provisions for inclusive education at the preschool stage, including admission regulations, resource guarantees, teacher training, and home-community collaboration to promote inclusive education (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2024).

4.2. The Characteristics of Inclusive Education in China

4.2.1. The Development of Inclusive Education Is Rooted in Traditional Chinese Culture

The development of inclusive education in the West reflects the struggle of disadvantaged groups for educational rights and interests, and is also a product of social and cultural evolution. It covers a variety of groups such as children in disadvantaged environments, ethnic minorities, marginalized groups, and people with disabilities. The civil rights movement in the 1950s gave birth to the concept of inclusive modern education. With the rise of constructivism, postmodernism and other trends, the importance of diversity, difference, marginality and non-centrality has been more highly valued, and disabled groups have begun to express their needs and strive for equal integration into social life and education (Ding, 2006).

The rise of inclusive education in China is not divorced from traditional culture. The concept of "disability" carries a heavy historical burden and negative cultural stigma in traditional Chinese culture. It is often considered to be the result of "sins in previous lives" and the "karma cycle," which has made people with disabilities and their families often feel ashamed while silently enduring injustice (Zhao, 2020). For a long time, people with disabilities lived with a "shame culture." Mainstream society has shown sympathy and pity for people with disabilities, and has extended to them charity, assistance, and welfare. Although this shows the glory of human nature, it also makes it difficult for people with disabilities to be treated equally. This overemphasis on disability, differences, and disadvantage has deepened the mainstream culture's prejudice against disabled groups and has continuously strengthened their disadvantaged status and outlier status within society (Hou, 2007).

Although China is actively promoting inclusive education, the shadow of negative preconceptions concerning traditional disability has not completely dissipated. The ideas of fatalism and original sin still exist in society, which shape people's views regarding the disabled. At the same time, there is a fundamental difference between Chinese societal values of benevolence, hierarchy and collectivism versus the Western concepts of fraternity, equality and individual freedom.

Based on these different cultures, there are differences between China and the West in the implementation of inclusive education. The West tends to adapt to the special educational needs of all students, including children with disabilities, through comprehensive school reforms. Meanwhile, China focuses more on children with disabilities and involves less school reforms. Western education focuses on the free development of personality and equal opportunities, and is committed to providing equal educational opportunities; while Chinese education is rooted in traditional benevolence and is committed to giving special care. Inclusive education has its uniqueness and challenges in the Chinese cultural context. It needs to properly handle the connection with historical culture and find inclusive education concepts and practical paths that are in line with China's actual situation.

4.2.2. The Number of Special Education Subjects Facing Inclusive Education

In the world, China's inclusive education is facing a major challenge of how to provide schooling opportunities for many children with disabilities. This challenge stems from the fact that China is one of the most populous countries in the world and has a large population of people with disabilities, which provides a broad background for the emergence and development of inclusive education. Since the late 1980s, China has begun to implement inclusive education for blind, deaf and intellectually disabled children. This is mainly because existing special education schools cannot meet all the needs of the many disabled children in receiving compulsory education. Therefore, it has become an inevitable choice for them to enroll in ordinary schools nearby (Deng & Du, 2019). Over the past 40 years, solving the enrollment problem of school-age children with disabilities and promoting the popularization of compulsory education have always been the core goals of inclusive education. In short, ensuring that children with disabilities can go to school is the fundamental starting point of China's inclusive education practice. At the same time, traditional Western countries with developed education, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, have generally achieved the popularization of compulsory education, and have effectively solved the enrollment problem of people with disabilities through special education schools. Therefore, inclusive education in Western countries is an activity with the goal to improve the quality and equity of education after popularizing compulsory education and special education. Whether it is the early "integration movement" in the United Kingdom or the "return to the mainstream" approach in the United States, the core is to consider the educational placement of children with disabilities from the perspective of "what is a fair and appropriate special education method." Therefore, based on the huge number of special education objectives, China cannot

follow the path of Western countries. However, with the decline of China's population birth rate in recent years, kindergartens as well as ordinary primary and secondary schools have generally encountered the problem of reduced student numbers and smaller class sizes. Small-class teaching has gradually become possible. Therefore, seizing the trend of small classes and promoting the deepening and quality improvement of inclusive education will be the key to the future development of inclusive education in China.

4.2.3. Inclusive Education

In China, inclusive education is progressing steadily, although special education schools have certain limitations in their capacity for professional support, and their integration process has not yet been fully realized. However, these schools are in urgent need of participating in inclusive education as resource centers. In countries where traditional education is relatively mature, special education schools have successfully transformed into supportive and service-oriented centers after two hundred years of evolution, providing solid professional support for inclusive education. However, in China's process of promoting inclusive education, the number of special education schools is obviously insufficient. Although the number of special education schools has increased to 2,345 in 2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023), they are still in the stage of connotation construction. Further, high-quality development research has not yet fully transformed them into regional resource centers. In terms of supporting inclusive education, the teaching staff, its professional level, and working hours are all insufficient. Therefore, strengthening connotation construction and promoting inclusive education have become a general trend in the development of special education schools. Providing support when development is not yet mature has become a prominent feature of inclusive education in China.

The Chinese national implementation of inclusive education has encountered the difficulties of large class sizes and insufficient acceptance capacity in ordinary schools. In addition to the lack of professional support for special education, there are other practical problems. The most prominent problem is that the class size in ordinary schools is too large. Teachers' energy is limited, and the large class size has brought severe challenges to inclusive education, resulting in the neglect or marginalization of children with special needs, and the emergence of the phenomenon of "sitting in class" and "mixed reading in class" (Pang, 2020). This is not because teachers lack a sense of responsibility, but because the class size is too large, and it is difficult for teachers to take care of the individual differences of each student. In comparison, European and American countries rarely encounter such problems. In addition, the lack of acceptance of inclusive education by the general education system and the public, the lack of relevant practical experience in ordinary schools, and the shortage of professional teaching staff are also issues that need to be urgently addressed. Despite these ongoing challenges, China's inclusive education has continued to move forward unrelentingly over the past 40 years.

4.2.4. Inclusive Education Development Towards a Multi-Model

Special education is influenced by the disability model, which refers to the concept of disability and how to treat people with disabilities. The Western disability model has gone through the medical biological model, the functionalist model, and the socio-political model (Julie, F. S., 2009). The biomedical model regards disability as a functional defect and emphasizes pathology. Therefore, education has a strong intervention and treatment component. The functionalist model believes that disability stems from ability defects and emphasizes that defects lead to failure. Therefore, education attaches importance to training and vocational training. The socio-political model believes that disability reflects human diversity, and the limitations of people with disabilities are due to insufficient social support. It advocates that people with disabilities have equal rights to education. With the change of the disability model, Western special education has gone through two centuries and gradually shifted from segregated institutions to ordinary classes. This process is accompanied by a transition from segregation to integration (Deng & Du, 2019).

In China, special education has completed the journey that took the West two centuries in just over 40 years. Driven by the concept of inclusive education, special education schools coexist with ordinary schools, and rehabilitation training centers coexist with various educational placement models. Medical biology, functionalism, and social and political models play a role together. Many provinces and cities promote experiments such as "integration of medicine and education" and "integration of health and education." Also, the exploration of "learning in regular classrooms" is supported by resource centers and has been written in official documents. Special education classes have reappeared in the form of "satellite classes" while resource classrooms have become an important part of inclusive education. China's special education model is diversified, and the overall trend is towards integration. Its development model is different from the conversion and replacement of the West. China's approach represents a coexistence and complementarity of multiple paradigms, showing the pragmatic characteristics of China's inclusive education. This stems from the background assumptions that China's special education foundation is weak and social demand is high. Each model has its value and there is no need to exclude each other.

4.2.5. Chinese-Style Inclusive Education

Inclusive education advocates providing fair and high-quality education for all children in ordinary schools, so that the segregated education model tends to die out. At present, the Western special education school system is basically eliminated from the Chinese system (Xing & Lei, 2013). However, while promoting inclusive education, China has increased its efforts to build special education schools, which has aroused international doubts. In addition to continuing to enroll disabled students, Chinese special education schools also play the role of "backbone," "support," "demonstration," and "radiation" in inclusive education. After practical exploration, China has established a pattern with inclusive education as the main body and special education schools as the backbone.

Unlike the West, most of China's special education schools were built after the reform and opening, guided by modern educational concepts and closely linked to inclusive education. The existence of special education schools is to better promote integration and become an important part of inclusive education. However, the isolated education implemented by Western special education schools from the beginning is characterized by closure and shelter. In addition, the development of Western inclusive education relies on its own complete professional support system, while China's inclusive education does not have its own support system and can only be supported by special education schools. At present, most of China's special education schools have been transformed into regional special education resource centers, providing professional support for special education and inclusive education. Therefore, special education schools and inclusive education together constitute the practical path of China's inclusive education, showing the pragmatic model of China's localized inclusive education.

5. Discussion

5.1. Research on the History of Inclusive Education in China

This study's historical timeline and stage naming differ in several respects from previous research, including Ding (2024) roughly divides the development of inclusive education in China into four stages: the initial stage of development characterized by the generation of localized policies, the experimental exploration stage characterized by strengthened support, the institutional construction stage characterized by the construction of an integrated system, and the gradual maturity stage characterized by the promotion of high-quality development. There are slight differences between Y. Ding and this study relative to the time division. The time division of this study is mainly based on the promulgation of major laws and regulations and social and political changes. In terms of stage naming, the second and third stages of this study are named as the institutional and reflection stages, while the second and third stages of Y. Ding are named as the strengthened support and institutional stages. The naming of the stages in this study not only considers the policy proposals but also combines with the actual situation. The history of the development of teaching management in China is important for students to learn in line with the research of Siripongnapat, et al. (2025). Their research findings revealed that: 1) Teachers and students expressed a need for instructional development in history courses, emphasizing diverse learning processes rather than rote memorization. 2) A learning activity set was designed, consisting of three learning activities with a total duration of seven hours.

Huang & Wu. (2021) divided the development of inclusive education policy into three stages: 1) from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the late 1980s, this stage was driven by national development needs; 2) from the early 1990s to the early 21st century, this stage was driven by practical problems; and 3) from 2014 to the present, this stage was driven by national development needs, policy evolution and practical problems. This study differs from this topic in terms of historical research objects, and its research focus is limited to inclusive education policy.

Zhao (2020) divided the development of inclusive education in China into three main stages: 1) the first is the initial exploration stage (2000-2010), during which the number of scholars engaged in inclusive education research was relatively small; 2) the second is the continuous development stage (2011-2016) Compared with the previous stage, the research results of this period have been significantly improved; and, 3) the third stage is the deepening development stage (2017 to present), during which inclusive education research reached its peak. This stage division is mainly based on the number of scholars' publications.

Niu (2024) systematically sorted out the development process of China's inclusive education policy, pointing out that the policy has gone through three main stages: the initial germination period (1951-1987), the comprehensive expansion period (1988-2008) and the deepening and improvement period (2009 to present). The study further summarizes the characteristics of the development of inclusive education in China in three achievements: 1) The policy concept has achieved a shift from protecting educational rights and interests to focusing on educational quality; 2) The policy system has achieved an evolution from administrative-led overall management to government-led collaborative governance; 3) Last, the policy process has achieved a shift from a problem-oriented approach to an effect-driven approach. This study provides important inspiration for the policy analysis of this study.

Pang (2020) made a detailed division of the development process of inclusive education in China, and proposed four development stages. This study adopted the same stage division method based on the recognition of its division basis. However, this study differs from Pang Wen's study in terms of the selection of historical materials and the evaluation of historical events.

In summary, many scholars have designated different divisions of the historical stages of inclusive education in China, among which the view that the introduction of policies, as the dividing point, is dominant. However, regardless of the division results, the development process of inclusive education in China shows a clear evolutionary trajectory. Based on the extensive collection of policies, regulations, academic papers and practical cases related to inclusive education, this study provides a detailed historical timeline of inclusive education development in China.

5.2. Research on the Characteristics of Inclusive Education in China

This study conducted an in-depth discussion on the characteristics of inclusive education in China. There are some differences between this study and the existing literature in terms of the statistics related to the number of characteristics, and the depth of the characteristic summary.

Li (2024) pointed out that inclusive education in China faces realistic challenges such as a large population base, insufficient professional support, and a weak practical foundation. This study agrees with Li La's point of view, and on this basis it further elaborates on the uniqueness of inclusive education in China in terms of culture, model and path.

Xie & Deng (2020) proposed that inclusive education in China is rooted in a unique traditional cultural soil, presenting the characteristics of multiple models and integration, and has the characteristics of the coexistence of special education schools and inclusive education. This study is consistent with the research conclusions of both researchers in some of the characteristic summaries.

Jing (2021) proposed differences between inclusive education in China and the West from a multicultural perspective. In terms of ideology, Western culture is based on the concept of rights that "separation is inequality," while traditional Chinese culture is deeply influenced by the Confucian idea of "education for all." In terms of implementation, the West advocates "meeting special educational needs," while China emphasizes "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude." In terms of purpose, Western society tends to "build an inclusive society," while China pursues the concepts of "great societal harmony" and "harmonious society." Jing Shi's views are insightful and provide important reference value for this study and are worthy of in-depth discussion by the academic community.

Many scholars have expounded on China's inclusive education from multiple dimensions such as in the current situation and problems, localization, policy formulation, and cultural traditions. However, no research has fully revealed the differences between China's inclusive education and global inclusive education practices. Based on the inheritance of previous research results, this study summarizes the characteristics of China's inclusive education through theoretical speculation, aiming to show readers the uniqueness of China's inclusive education.

6. Conclusion

The theory of inclusive education has drawn an ideal blueprint for the development of special education in the world. However, not all countries can fully adapt to this model. Many countries are working hard to promote the implementation of inclusive education, but so far, no country has been able to achieve truly high-quality and efficient inclusive education. No country's practice model can provide a standardized template for other countries. This study aims to sort out the history of inclusive education in China and summarize its development characteristics. This will hopefully inspire more professionals engaged in special education theory research and practice to conduct in-depth thinking, critical questioning and innovative exploration.

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