

Development status and enlightenment of preschool integrated education in South Korea

Junzhi Wang^{1,*}, Bingjing Wu², Wenhui Ai²

¹Woosong University, Daejeon, 34606, Korea

²Yulin College, Yulin, 719000, China

*Corresponding author: 1075945891@qq.com

Keywords: South Korea; Special Children; Preschool Inclusive Education

Abstract: South Korea's preschool inclusive education aims to provide comprehensive early intervention, emphasizing teacher training and family involvement. It offers a normalized, non-isolated teaching environment for special children aged 3 to 6, encouraging them to learn together with typical children, aiming to provide high-quality education and care for special children. The current development status of inclusive education in South Korea provides valuable insights for other countries. This paper explores various aspects of South Korea's preschool inclusive education, intending to provide theoretical support and practical experience for establishing a support system for preschool inclusive education in China.

1. Research Background

In recent years, preschool inclusive education has gradually become a vigorously promoted form of early education for special children in China. Preschool inclusive education refers to providing a normalized, non-isolated teaching environment for special children aged 3 to 6, offering all special education and related services to facilitate the joint learning of special and typical children, achieving true inclusion [1]. According to the second national sampling survey of disabled people, there are approximately 1.41 million disabled children aged 0 to 6 in China, with an annual increase of 199,000 [2]. In response to the educational issues of special children aged 3 to 6, various departments in the country have successively issued documents advocating and supporting the implementation of preschool inclusive education. The "Second Phase Special Education Promotion Plan (2017-2020)" and the "Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities" stipulate the need to "vigorously develop preschool education for disabled children, support regular kindergartens in accepting disabled children. Admission of disabled children who meet the legal and regulatory conditions shall not be refused." Many provinces and cities in the "Third Phase Action Plan for Preschool Education (2018-2020)" emphasize the "active promotion of the work of keeping education and care with the park for disabled children and the improvement of the quality of keeping education and care with the park."

Preschool inclusion is the premise of school and social inclusion. However, at the current stage in China, there are still urgent issues to be addressed in terms of the placement of disabled children, policy support, curriculum adjustments, related supporting services, and teacher resources in

preschool inclusive education [3]. Effective inclusion is based on high-quality, systematic support services to achieve true inclusion, not just placing special children in a regular educational environment but also providing systematic, comprehensive, and continuous support and related services [4]. Therefore, establishing a support system for preschool inclusive education is a prerequisite for ensuring its smooth implementation.

Since the 1980s, South Korea, our neighboring country, has been operating special classes in regular kindergartens for disabled children, practicing preschool inclusive education. Currently, over 80% of special children in South Korea receive inclusive education in regular kindergartens [5]. Through years of practice, South Korea's preschool inclusive education has matured. Studying the current development of South Korea's preschool inclusive education can help us understand the composition and operation of its support system, providing useful references and insights for constructing a support system for preschool inclusive education in China and enhancing the quality of preschool inclusive education.

2. Current Status of Preschool Inclusive Education in South Korea

2.1. Scale and Financial Support of Preschool Inclusive Education

As of the end of 2019, the number of disabled infants and young children aged 0 to 6 in South Korea was 14,274 [6], and the number of those receiving preschool inclusive education in regular early childhood education institutions reached 9,628, accounting for nearly 66% of disabled infants and young children aged 0 to 6 [7]. The institutions implementing inclusive education include 1,897 kindergartens [8] and 1,100 children's houses [9]. In 2007, South Korea revised the "Special Education Act," initiating the compulsory education system for special children. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance provide tuition support for special children receiving preschool inclusive education [10]. In addition, kindergartens with special classes receive additional funding from the government. The government also supports therapeutic expenses such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, language therapy, hearing therapy, art, music, behavior therapy, games, and psychomotor therapy for special children in preschool education institutions.

2.2. Configuration of Special Classes and Infrastructure Construction in Kindergartens

In South Korea, regular kindergartens can only employ special education teachers if they have special classes [11]. Kindergartens without special classes, if admitting special children, can request mobile education from the regional special education support center after obtaining parental consent. The standards for setting up special classes vary with different educational stages. In the kindergarten stage, if there are 1 to 4 special education students, one special class is set up; if there are more than 4 students, two or more special classes are established, each equipped with a special education teacher. Currently, there are 814 kindergartens in South Korea with special classes, with an average of 3.5 students in each special class [12]. Regarding infrastructure construction, all kindergartens, whether or not they have special classes or special children, are required to be constructed as barrier-free facilities according to universal design principles. To reflect the goal of inclusion, the internal classroom environment of special classes in South Korean kindergartens is equipped not only with regular teaching aids and materials but also with special teaching aids for the specific needs of special children. These include assessment tools for intelligence, social skills, and basic learning abilities, sensory integration training equipment, multimedia learning materials, wheelchairs, canes, adjustable learning desks, walking training machines, etc. [13].

2.3. Teacher Training

Since 2009, South Korea's Ministry of Education has made it mandatory for universities to offer courses related to special education in their teacher training programs. In 2016, the Ministry of Education explicitly required that students who entered universities after 2013 must take teacher education courses in three areas: teaching theory, teacher competency, and educational internship to obtain a teacher's qualification certificate. In the teacher competency field, inclusive education courses are included[14]. Combining the "Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards" enacted in 2012 and the "Special Education Teacher Professional Standards" introduced in 2015, it is evident that South Korea has specific course requirements for teacher training in both early childhood education and special education. Students majoring in early childhood education must obtain credits in special education-related subjects, and students majoring in special education need credits in early childhood education. To enhance the inclusive education literacy of in-service teachers, regulations stipulate that special education-related lectures be included in kindergarten teacher training courses, and head teachers of regular classes for special children must undergo more than 60 hours of professional training.

2.4. Diagnosis and Assessment of Special Children

In South Korea, kindergartens implementing inclusive education must develop individualized education plans for special children at the beginning of each semester. For kindergartens without special classes, special education teachers from the regional special education support center conduct educational assessments for special children with parental consent. Kindergartens with special classes have their special education teachers assess special children's development in the areas of physical, cognitive, communication, social-emotional, and adaptive behavior through observation, interviews, and educational assessment tools. Commonly used assessment tools by special education teachers include the Korean version of the Portage Guide to Early Education, the Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs (0-3 years and 3-6 years), and the Korean version of the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS) [15]. When special children are admitted to regular classes or special classes in regular kindergartens, they need to submit results from psychological examinations or hospital diagnostic certificates from the past year. Additionally, they must undergo further examinations at parenting support centers or psychological assessment institutions. For children not identified as requiring special education before enrollment but show significant differences compared to their peers or require special support later on, screening tools are used for an initial assessment. If further assessment for special education is deemed necessary and the child's guardian agrees, an application can be submitted to the local special education support center for a comprehensive diagnostic assessment. The entire diagnostic assessment process should be completed within one month.

2.5. Curriculum Design for Preschool Inclusive Education

The preschool inclusive education curriculum in South Korea emphasizes comprehensiveness, diversity, and individualization, aiming to promote the comprehensive development and learning of children in the preschool stage. The curriculum focuses on integrating different educational methods and subjects, building on the foundation of regular education courses while concurrently offering special education courses. It emphasizes the comprehensive development of special children's cognition, emotion, social skills, and physical abilities. This is manifested in three main aspects: comprehensive curriculum design, interdisciplinary teaching, and the use of various assessment methods. First, educational institutions design comprehensive curricula covering various subjects and

fields, such as language, mathematics, science, health, arts, physical education, and social skills, to promote the overall development of special children. Second, teachers integrate interdisciplinary knowledge to help children establish a more comprehensive understanding through teaching activities that incorporate content from different subjects. Finally, a variety of assessment methods, including observation, case studies, assignments, and project assessments, are used in addition to standardized tests to evaluate students' cognitive abilities, learning skills, and overall development. These approaches collectively reflect South Korea's practical attention to and implementation of comprehensive education in inclusive education, intending to cultivate the various abilities and qualities needed for the comprehensive development of special children.

3. Characteristics of Preschool Inclusive Education in South Korea

3.1. Emphasis on Game-based and Experiential Learning

South Korean preschool inclusive education places a strong emphasis on game-based and experiential learning to captivate children's interest in a more engaging and enjoyable manner. Through games, practical activities, and experiences, it aims to cultivate children's spirit of exploration and problem-solving abilities. These games involve aspects such as problem-solving, cognitive training, social skills, and emotional management, promoting learning for special children through interactivity and entertainment. Simultaneously, there is a focus on experiential learning, where kindergartens provide various opportunities for experiential learning, such as field trips, practical activities, and scenario simulations. This approach allows children to learn, explore, and apply knowledge in real-life environments, fostering social development and enhancing fundamental life skills.

3.2. Emphasis on Interdisciplinary Professional Team Collaboration

Whether in public kindergartens or private early childhood education institutions, interdisciplinary professional teams are established. These teams consist of educational psychologists, special education teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers, and other professionals. The professional team collaboratively develops personalized education plans based on the specific needs and assessment results of each child. This plan includes understanding the child's learning style, strengths, and needs, designing corresponding teaching strategies, and implementing support measures. Team members regularly communicate, share information, and collaborate to address issues encountered by children in learning and development. Ongoing assessments are conducted to adjust and optimize educational plans based on evaluation results. Additionally, interdisciplinary professional teams regularly liaise with parents and the community, providing relevant support and training to extend learning and support beyond the school environment.

3.3. Quality Transition Services from Preschool to Elementary School

The South Korean preschool inclusive education system emphasizes enhancing the quality of transition services. For special children, various preschool education institutions formulate individualized transition plans to ensure a smooth transition to elementary school in terms of both learning and daily life. Kindergartens implementing inclusive education act as central hubs, actively connecting and collaborating with parents of special children, elementary schools, and relevant institutions. Support for elementary school enrollment includes providing information related to elementary school admission to parents of special children, sharing successful cases of elementary school transition support, and offering parent education. This helps parents of special children receive

sufficient information and emotional support, ensuring that children can continue to receive similar or complementary support services between kindergarten and elementary school.[16]

4. Insights from South Korean Preschool Inclusive Education for China

4.1. Accelerating the Legislative Process for Inclusive Education

Compared to South Korea's legal framework supporting inclusive education, China's local regulations on preschool education touch upon inclusive education but lack thorough implementation of inclusive education principles and detailed policies for preschool inclusive education support.[17] The draft of the "People's Republic of China Preschool Education Law" released by the Ministry of Education in September 2020 includes five articles and six clauses related to the education of disabled children. However, it lacks specific content regarding funding and facilities for preschool inclusive education and the top-level design for the training of preschool inclusive teachers. In the future, there is a need to improve the quality of local regulations on preschool education concerning the education of disabled children. Simultaneously, China should actively draw on successful strategies for promoting preschool inclusive education from various countries and regions, tailoring and refining laws and regulations on preschool and special education to accelerate the legislative process for inclusive education.

4.2. Strengthening the Cultivation of Preservice Early Childhood Teachers' Inclusive Education Competence

Research indicates that the impact of preservice education is more cost-effective, efficient, and profound compared to in-service education. South Korea's development of preschool inclusive education demonstrates that teacher training extends beyond the field of special education to encompass the entire domain of early childhood education. In China, the initiation of preservice education on teachers' inclusive education competence came relatively late, as reflected in the "Opinions on the Development of Special Education" issued in 1989.[18] A survey in 2018 of 137 teacher training institutions nationwide found that only 13.9% of these institutions offered courses related to special education, and these courses were either occasional or had been offered in the past.[19] Currently, the curriculum for inclusive education in preservice teacher education in China has certain limitations in terms of nature, objectives, and content.[20] Therefore, it is imperative to reform the current teacher training system for early childhood education and incorporate preservice training requirements for inclusive education competence into relevant policies for preschool education.

4.3. Reinforcing the Central Role of Government in Investment in Preschool Inclusive Education

Current policies for funding special children's preschool education in China follow the principle of "local initiatives with central subsidies," and the standards for assistance vary across regions. In light of the characteristics of funding allocation in South Korean preschool inclusive education, it is recommended to strengthen the central role and leadership of the government in investment in preschool inclusive education. On the one hand, the country should adhere to the policy of public funding for popularization, increase financial investment in popularizing preschool education, implement phased and tiered reduction policies, and ultimately ensure the foundation of funding for preschool education for special needs children. On the other hand, the state encourages society to pay attention to inclusive preschool education for special needs children through preferential policies and

other means. By donating or establishing funds, various donation channels are provided for social organizations and individuals, gradually creating a cultural environment and social atmosphere that promotes funding support for inclusive preschool education for special needs children.

References

- [1] Buysee V., Bailey B. *Behavioral and Developmental Outcomes in Young Children with Disabilities in Integrated and Specialized Settings: A Review of Comparative Studies*, *The Journal of Special Education*, 629, (4), 1993, pp. 19-35.
- [2] Ling Kang, Bai Xianchun, et al. *Report on the Development of China's Disabled People's Career (2006-2015)*, China Statistics Press, 2017.
- [3] Qin Wan, Xiao Fei. *An Overview of the Development and Characteristics of Preschool Inclusive Education in the United States and its Implications for China*, *Modern Special Education*, 2019, No. 11, pp. 75-80.
- [4] Su Xueyun. *Support System for Inclusive Education of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in American Elementary Schools*, *Basic Education*, 2016, No. 2, pp. 104-112.
- [5] Ministry of Education, South Korea. *Special Education Statistics 2019*, 7-11 edition.
- [6] Statistics Korea, National Statistical Portal, <https://kosis.kr/index/index.do>, 2020.20.25.
- [7] Ministry of Education, South Korea. *Special Education Statistics 2019*, National Institute of Special Education, www.nise.go.kr, 2019.06.28.
- [8] Health North Support Branch, Korea, *2019 Childcare Statistics*, 2019.
- [9] National Legal Government Center, Korea. *Disability Special Education Act*, <https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/Isinfop.do?LsiSeq=210521#0000>, 2020.02.06.
- [10] Ministry of Science and Technology, Korea. *Explanation of Korean Special Education Laws*. <http://www.mest.go.kr/>, 2012.07.07.
- [11] Republic of Korea. *Law on Education for Disabled Persons*. <http://www.law.go.kr/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=202273 & efYd=20180522#0000>.
- [12] Ministry of Education, South Korea. *Annual Report on Special Education*, 2019.09. 44th edition.
- [13] Ministry of Education, South Korea. *Gyeonggi-do Office of Education Standards for Special Education School Equipment and Materials*, 2016.
- [14] Lee Soonso, Kim Binjien, Park Youjin. *Comparative Analysis of Early Childhood Education Teacher Training Courses in Korea and the United States*, *Collection of Early Childhood Education Papers*, 2017, 21(3): 83-113.
- [15] Wu Yan. *Overview of South Korea's Support System for Preschool Inclusive Education*, *Journal of Nanjing Xiaozhuang University*, March 2023, Volume 2.
- [16] Zhao Xiaohong. *Issues and Countermeasures of Local Legislation on Preschool Education for Disabled Children: An Analysis Based on the Analysis of Preschool Education Regulations in Some Provinces*. *China Special Education*, 2021 (01): 26-30.
- [17] Wang Yan, Fan Wenjing, Feng Yajing. *Reflections and Suggestions on the Pre-service Training of Inclusive Education Competence for General Early Childhood Teachers in China*, *Journal of Education*, 2018, 14(6): 81-87.
- [18] Feng Yajing, Li Aifen, Wang Yan. *Investigation and Research on the Current Status of Special Education Courses for General Teachers in China*. *China Special Education*, 2016, (1): 9-15.
- [19] Wang Haiping. *Investigation on the Opening of Special Education Courses in Normal Colleges and Universities*. *China Special Education*, 2006, (12): 13-17.
- [20] Fan Xiaoting, Qu Shaowei, Ji Xiaohun. *Performance Evaluation of Preschool Education Assistance Policies Based on Data from 36 Provincially Evaluated Units Nationwide*. *Preschool Education Research*, 2015 (07): 43-51.