

Connotation, Development and Construction of the Concept of Preschool Integrated Education with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

As an important way to achieve educational equity and high-quality development, the popularization and development of preschool integrated education is particularly urgent. According to the existing research, one of the important problems in the development of preschool integrated education in China is the adequate understanding of the concept of integrated education. Therefore, understanding the development of preschool integrated education and constructing the concept of preschool integrated education with Chinese characteristics have become an important agenda to promote the high-quality development of preschool integrated education. Based on the relevant research of China's current preschool integrated education, this paper puts forward the concept of preschool integrated education with Chinese characteristics on the basis of traditional Chinese education concepts. These ideas are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and reflect the idea of universal love in Chinese culture. Finally, from the aspects of publicity and promotion, teacher training and policy formulation, this paper puts forward the strategy of constructing the concept of preschool integrated education with Chinese characteristics, so as to try to promote the combination of theory and practice of preschool integrated education and realize the high-quality development of preschool integrated education.

Keywords: High-Quality Development, Traditional Culture, Preschool Integrated Education, Core Concept

Introduction

It has become a strategic task of China's education to comprehensively improve the quality of basic education and build a high-quality basic education system (Zhi, Tingjin., 2020). To explore the "quality" of education is to seek whether education has reached the quality state in the two dimensions of "quality" and "quantity", and whether the ultimate goal of education has satisfied the needs of the service object - the development needs of people (Hou, Limin & Liu, Qian., 2023). Providing higher quality education for the people has become an inevitable requirement for building a high-quality education system in the new era, and it is also the value pursuit of educators.

In 2022, China's Ministry of Education, together with other departments, issued the "14th Five-Year Plan" Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education, which proposed the goal of "appropriate integration" from the perspective of building a high-quality special education system and emphasized the "active development of preschool special education"(Ministry of Education, 2023).The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed "strengthening preschool education and inclusive development of special education" from the strategic height of comprehensively promoting Chinese-style modernization(Xi Jinping,2022). In the current era of all-out efforts to promote Chinese-style modernization, the implementation and promotion of preschool integrated education is an inevitable trend of inclusive and high-quality development of China's preschool education, an important starting point for comprehensively promoting educational equity, and an indispensable link in the construction of a high-quality education system.

At present, China's preschool integrated education is still in the exploratory stage. Although preschool integrated education has received more and more attention, there are also some problems, such as insufficient integration concept and practice, low service level related to special education, and the quality of teacher-child interaction and peer interaction of special children needs to be improved(Yu Xiaomeng.,Ma Ruimin.,2022). Zhu Zongshun's research found that preschool integrated education is facing many difficulties, one of which is that the concept of preschool integrated education is not widely popularized. "The society, parents, kindergarten teachers and other stakeholders of preschool integrated education still lack a rational and scientific understanding of preschool integrated education, and it is difficult for kindergartens to incorporate the concept of integrated education into the concept of kindergarten management."(Wang Yanyan, Zhu Zongshun,2023) As an old Chinese saying goes: Knowledge is the beginning of action. Under the background of high-quality development, constructing the concept of preschool integrated education with Chinese characteristics and promoting the cognition and development of the concept of integration are of great practical significance to the theoretical development and practice of preschool integrated education.

Research Significance

In the strategic context of China's commitment to comprehensively enhancing the quality of basic education and establishing a high-quality basic education system, the importance of advancing preschool inclusive education is self-evident. This study delves into the connotation, development, and construction of preschool inclusive education with Chinese characteristics, aiming to fill critical gaps in the understanding and implementation of inclusive education concepts. By exploring fundamental theories and practical strategies compatible with Chinese cultural and educational environments, this research contributes to the broader discussion on achieving educational equity and quality improvement in early childhood education.

The study reveals the core significance of preschool inclusive education with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing traditional values such as "teaching without discrimination" (akin to the Chinese philosophical concept of "teaching without distinction of class"), respecting individual differences and centering on students, and cultivating a culture of care, acceptance, and integration. These principles are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, reflecting the universal love philosophy of Confucianism and providing a unique framework for inclusive education that aligns with historical wisdom and contemporary needs (Chen, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). By

elucidating these concepts, the study fosters a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of inclusive education, enhancing its local relevance and sustainability.

Secondly, the study proposes strategies for constructing preschool inclusive education with Chinese characteristics, including enhancing value identification through advocacy, promoting educational concepts through teacher training, and ensuring the implementation of these concepts through policy formulation. These strategies recognize the pivotal role of teachers in driving change and emphasize the importance of continuous professional development (Zhang & Wang, 2020; OECD, 2019). By advocating inclusive values consistent with policy support and legal frameworks, the study contributes to the systemic changes required for high-quality inclusive education.

Furthermore, this study addresses the pressing issue of inadequate understanding of preschool inclusive education concepts. By emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of inclusive practices, it encourages stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and parents, to collaborate towards a shared vision of inclusive excellence (Li & Liu, 2019; USAID, 2020). This collaboration is crucial for overcoming barriers and creating an environment where all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, can thrive.

Additionally, the study incorporates evidence from domestic and international research to support its findings. For instance, research from the United States has shown that inclusive preschools lead to improved social skills and academic outcomes for all children (National Research Council, 2002). Similarly, studies in Europe have highlighted the importance of teacher training and support in implementing inclusive practices effectively (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014). These international examples provide valuable insights and lessons learned that can be adapted and applied to the Chinese context.

In conclusion, this study holds significant importance for enhancing the quality and equity of education in China. By exploring and promoting inclusive education concepts that resonate with Chinese cultural values, it not only enriches theoretical knowledge but also provides practical guidance for implementation. Therefore, this research serves as a catalyst for policy reform, teacher empowerment, and social change, ultimately aiming to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality, inclusive educational experience.

Connotation Development of Preschool Integrated Education Concept

Development of Integrated Education Concept

People's attitude toward the disabled has gone through four stages, namely, from deprivation of life, acquisition of the right to survival, separation education to the call for equal right to education. The attitude toward the disabled is based on the progress of human civilization, and provides a civilized gene for the generation and development of special education in the future (Wang Zhenzhou, 2016). With the rise of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the continuous exploration of science, people's minds have been liberated, their understanding has been sublimated, and their attitudes towards the disabled have gradually changed. From isolation to integration, from closure to openness, the concept of integrated education has gradually developed.

The concept of integrated education was first introduced in the Salamanca Declaration adopted at the World Congress on Special Education held in Salamanca, Spain, in June 1994. Inclusive education (also known as "inclusive education") is a new educational concept and continuous educational process that starts from the principles of equality and acceptance, focuses on the needs of children, respects learners' differences, focuses on human

development, opposes discrimination and exclusion, and promotes the participation of all children in culture and society. Integrated education is a kind of educational idea, value pursuit and development process(UNESCO,2005).

The core value of integrated education is the concept of equality and participation based on human basic rights. Integrated education advocates that everyone has equal right to education, not only to allow children to have equal opportunities to attend school and participate in learning activities, but also to treat each child equally and meet their different needs. The school shall accept all children without regard to their physical, intellectual, verbal, spiritual or other conditions and shall provide equal educational opportunities and a high level of quality education to all children in the community. One of the most important ideas of integrated education is that every student is unique and every child is a respected member of the group, a subject of teaching and learning life.

Development of Preschool Integrated Education in China

Preschool integrated education refers to the form of education that allows preschool children with special educational needs to enter general kindergartens and receive care and education together with normal children(Zhou Nianli,2006). The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children with disabilities should be ensured effective access to and acceptance of education, training, health services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreational opportunities. The chinese government has always attached great importance to the development of preschool integrated education.

In the 1980s, China started the practice of inclusive education for children with disabilities through the way of attending classes(UNESCO,2007). Article 23 (Special education) of the Draft Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020 clearly states that "local people's governments at or above the county level shall, according to the number, type and distribution of disabled preschool children in the region, coordinate the implementation of various forms of preschool special education and promote integrated education." Kindergartens shall accept disabled preschool children who have the ability to receive general education. The government(Ministry of Education, 2020)encourages and supports qualified special education schools, child welfare institutions and rehabilitation institutions to set up kindergartens (preschool classes)."The Law of Preschool Education has clear requirements for preschool integrated education, and promoting the development of preschool integrated education in the form of legislation will undoubtedly play a huge role in promoting it. In addition, the Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities amended in 2017 states that "Children with disabilities enjoy equal rights to education in accordance with the law, and preschool education institutions shall receive and implement education in accordance with the law." The "14th Five-Year Plan" Action Plan for the Development and Promotion of Special Education issued in 2022 encourages "ordinary kindergartens to accept disabled children with the ability to receive general education into the nearby kindergarten with classes." "China's Education Modernization 2035" further proposes that in the new era, China's education should adhere to the principle of education without class, guarantee everyone's equal right to education, strive to provide fair, high-quality and inclusive education, make education choices more diverse and the path of growth broader, so that the fruits of education reform and development can benefit all people more fairly, so that everyone has the opportunity to excel in life.

Preschool integration education insists on child-centered, equal and fair acceptance of every child, without classification, exclusion or discrimination, meeting the needs of all children, and promoting the healthy physical and mental development of all children. By providing a diverse and accepting environment for exceptional children to learn and grow together with ordinary children, preschool integration education helps to break down social barriers, enhance mutual understanding and respect, and foster empathy and cooperation. Preschool integration education focuses on providing individualized educational support according to each child's unique needs and abilities, which helps special children to get better development in an environment suitable for them, and encourages ordinary children to recognize and respect each person's differences, which is conducive to the personalized development of children. The development of preschool integrated education can enhance the communication ability, communication ability and acceptance ability among children, and promote the cognition and development of children's diversified thinking, which can promote the high-quality development of preschool education.

Connotation of the Concept of Preschool Integrated Education with Chinese Characteristics

Xi Jinping emphasized that cultural self-confidence is "a more basic, broader and deeper self-confidence" and "a more basic, deeper and more enduring force." (Xi Jinping, 2022; Wang Menghui, 2024) In the 5,000-year history of China's splendid civilization, the light of traditional culture shines and nourishes the land of China. In the development process of preschool integrated education, we should not only learn advanced education concepts, but also be good at integrating with traditional Chinese culture to build integrated education concepts with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, in the context of high-quality development, the construction of preschool integrated education concept with Chinese characteristics has become an important driving force to promote the high-quality development of preschool integrated education.

Equality in Education without Discrimination

The traditional Confucian ideology in China resonates with the concept of inclusive education, as Confucius advocated for equality in education regardless of social class. In the *Analects*, it is stated: "The Master said, 'There should be teaching without class distinctions.'" (Yang Bojun, 2009.) This implies that everyone has the equal right to receive education, irrespective of their background. Confucius emphasized the principle of equality in education and advocated for an educational system that does not discriminate based on social status or wealth. Fairness and equality are fundamental values and goals in human educational development, and every child should be treated equally and impartially.

The ancient saying goes, "People are similar in nature but differ in habits." There is not much difference when people are born, as their character and abilities are similar. However, the influence of social environment and education can bring about significant changes in one's nature. Confucius emphasized the teachability of people by stating, "I have never refused to instruct anyone who comes to me seeking knowledge." (Yang Bojun, 2009.) This statement highlights the importance of education for everyone, regardless of their differences. In the process of inclusive preschool education, there are both typical children and special needs children. Regardless of whether they are typical or special needs children, they should be seen as equal and lovable angels in the eyes of teachers. They should receive equal care and love. Regardless of their physical condition, personality traits, or family environment, it is

important to practice "teaching without discrimination" and ensure fairness and equality for all.

Respect Differences and Take Students as the Foundation

Legend has it that the dragon had nine children, but they were all different. All men are created equal, but they are different because of changes in environment and education. American educator John Dewey put forward the concept of child-centered education, emphasizing that education should pay attention to each child's personality and interests, respect children's autonomy and creativity, and encourage them to actively explore and learn. Confucius said, "Zai is simple-minded. Shen is dull. Shi is deviant. You is boorish." meaning that each of Confucius's students have their own character and characteristics, some are stupid, some are blunt, some are extreme, some are rude, so human life is diverse, it is because of the essential characteristics of life diversity determines the diversity of characteristics and personalized nature of education. Therefore, on the basis of respecting differences and taking students as the foundation, Confucius put forward the educational thought of teaching students according to their aptitude.

The core of individualized teaching lies in individualized education, which embodies the concept of people-oriented education and the respect and recognition of individual differences of educational objects. This principle recognizes that each student is a unique individual with different learning needs and development potential, and therefore education should be adapted to the characteristics of each student, rather than students adapting to a uniform educational model. This requires different educational principles, strategies and methods for different students. Treatment of ordinary children and special children's education methods are definitely different, for disabled children, not only from the perspective of diversity of life to understand, equal treatment and respect, but also according to their temperament and uniqueness, the implementation of personalized education and guidance, teaching in accordance with their aptitude.

The development of preschool integrated education is inseparable from the development of preschool teachers' individualized teaching, and also needs individualized education. In view of the differences of different types of disabled students, special education should adopt more individualized education, develop strengths and make up for weaknesses, and save losses, so as to better meet the personality development and different special needs of disabled students, and promote the maximum development of their individual strengths and life potential(Ding Yong,2021).

Love and Inclusion, Acceptance and Integration

In 2015, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set out goals and principles for education development, emphasizing fairness, inclusiveness, and quality, with none left behind. Love and inclusion are the common consensus for the development of inclusive education. The Analects of Confucius records, "Fanchi asked about benevolence. Confucius said, 'Love others.'"(Yang Bojun,2009) This is an important manifestation of Confucius' theory of "Ren," which means that a person must have a loving heart for others in order to fulfill his social responsibilities. Confucius' concept of "Ren" contains the value of caring and inclusiveness, "What you don't want for yourself, don't impose on others."(Yang Xijie.2005) Be strict with yourself and be kind to others. In the process of preschool inclusive education, we cannot avoid dealing with a group of special children, who may have physical disabilities, low intelligence, autism, depression, etc. These special children need the love and

inclusion of teachers, parents, and ordinary children. Only in this way can they live in harmony and develop together.

The "Book of Rites: The Great Harmony" describes the vision of a utopian society: "The way of the great harmony is to make the world as one community," and "to ensure that the elderly are provided for, the able-bodied are employed, and the young are nurtured. Those who are widowed, orphaned, lonely, disabled or sick should all be cared for." The concept of making the world as one community emphasizes equality among all beings. Social development should guarantee support for the elderly, enable adults to utilize their strengths, and facilitate healthy growth for children. It aims to provide care and support for those who are widowed in old age, orphaned at a young age, childless in old age or unable to work due to disability. In addition to this idea from "Mencius: King Hui of Liang," which states "I take care of my aged parents just as I would want others to take care of theirs; I raise my own children just as I would want others to raise theirs." Both thoughts fully embody traditional Chinese benevolence. Caring and inclusiveness have always been core values in Chinese culture and need to be continued and developed.

Combining traditional benevolent thoughts with inclusive education concepts can help promote high-quality development in early childhood inclusive education. Sincerely embracing inclusive education principles will contribute significantly towards advancing high-quality early childhood inclusive education.

Strategies for Constructing the Concept of Preschool Inclusive Education with Chinese Characteristics

The implementation of inclusive education holds significant importance, as it not only aids in the development of language and social skills among children with special needs (Yang Xijie, 2005), but also fosters acceptance and attention towards others, encouraging proactive helping behaviors in young children (Wang Y, 2011). Despite increased attention to the development of preschool inclusive education, numerous challenges and difficulties persist. Existing surveys indicate that parents of typically developing children tend to hold relatively conservative views on preschool inclusive education, showing less enthusiasm compared to parents of special needs children (Yang J. 2015). Over the past decade, there has been little improvement in the acceptance levels among preschool teachers and parents of typically developing children regarding special needs children (Liu Xiaohong, Deng Yuchao. 2018). From a societal perspective on preschool inclusion for special needs children, while relevant stakeholders demonstrate some degree of recognition for the concept of inclusion, there remains a substantial gap between acknowledgment and actual practice (YU Xiaomeng, et al, 2022). In light of high-quality developmental goals and considering the challenges faced by preschool inclusive education, it is essential to construct a uniquely Chinese concept of preschool inclusive education that meets public demands under the framework "every child receives care; every child receives quality education."

Promotion and Advocacy to Enhance Value Recognition

The concept of ideology typically refers to individuals' fundamental views and beliefs regarding the essence, value, and developmental direction of various matters. Ideology serves as the foundation and premise for guiding actions and decisions, reflecting the values, beliefs, and goals of individuals or collectives. The advancement of inclusive education necessitates a transformation in the entrenched ideologies held by teachers, parents, and society at large concerning children with special needs. Therefore, establishing a Chinese-style preschool

inclusive education ideology must begin with strengthening promotion efforts to enhance recognition of its value.

In today's society, advancements in technology have made communication increasingly convenient; diverse methods for obtaining information are now more accessible than ever. The means of information dissemination have also become more varied and efficient—ranging from traditional media such as television, newspapers, and radio to modern platforms like public accounts on social media and short videos—all serving as effective channels for promoting the spread of inclusive education ideologies. A multifaceted approach is essential; it is crucial to leverage media outreach alongside educational initiatives to reshape societal perceptions towards disabilities. This will foster deeper understanding and respect for children's differences while encouraging fairer and more positive treatment (Feng Xuezheng, Guan Wenjun, 2023).

Moreover, the integration of traditional culture can further aid in enhancing people's comprehension of China's unique preschool inclusive education philosophy. Special education constitutes an integral part of our educational system; how we treat vulnerable groups serves as a significant indicator of societal progress in civilization. Through promotional activities and educational campaigns aimed at raising public awareness about the importance of inclusive education—eliminating biases while fostering inclusivity—the understanding and support for this initiative within society can be effectively advanced.

Cultivating Teachers and Enhancing Educational Philosophy

Teachers serve as organizers, supporters, and guides in the teaching process. The construction of a Chinese-style inclusive early childhood education philosophy relies heavily on teachers' support for and understanding of this concept. Currently, there is a significant shortage of preschool educators who possess both general early childhood education knowledge and specialized skills in special education. Therefore, it is imperative to cultivate teachers who are equipped with the principles of inclusive early childhood education.

Inclusive early childhood educators focus on enhancing teacher quality and capabilities rather than changing titles due to shifts in educational targets. These educators embody beliefs in inclusive education, master relevant knowledge and skills, and meet diverse student needs as high-quality professionals. The training of inclusive early childhood teachers should be regarded as a primary platform for advancing the philosophy of inclusion in education (Xie Zhengli, Deng Meng, 2018). It is important to recognize that the formation of an inclusive educational philosophy does not occur overnight; instead, it should be integrated throughout the entire professional development journey of educators (Wang Min, 2023).

Firstly, in the realm of pre-service education, it is essential to fully leverage the role of higher education institutions in nurturing students. There should be an emphasis on integrating traditional culture into daily education and life. In terms of curriculum instruction, it is crucial to maximize the educational value inherent in course teaching. Notably, the instruction of special education courses serves as a primary platform for cultivating inclusive educational concepts among students majoring in early childhood education. Students should be guided to develop a perspective on children that embodies "education without discrimination," an educational philosophy centered around "teaching according to individual needs," and a value system that embraces "inclusive acceptance." This subtle yet profound approach will foster their understanding of early childhood inclusive education principles while deepening their recognition of the teaching profession within this context, ultimately leading to a sense of professional identity. The cultivation of early childhood educators'

inclusive educational philosophies post-employment is equally significant. It is vital to harness various influences such as guiding principles from kindergartens, family supervision and collaboration, societal training initiatives for skill enhancement, and self-reflective learning processes to further advance these inclusive educational ideals. Moreover, it is important to prepare mentally for potential teacher burnout that may arise. Educators must confront challenges head-on by analyzing issues critically and overcoming difficulties through equipping themselves with inclusive educational ideologies as well as relevant professional knowledge and skills—thus liberating themselves from occupational fatigue.

Formulating Policies to Promote the Implementation of Inclusive Education Concepts

The construction of inclusive education concepts requires not only diversified promotion and teacher training but also the assurance provided by policies and regulations. Legal frameworks are fundamental guarantees for translating educational concepts into practice, as well as for ensuring the stability and sustainable development of educational policies (Feng Xuezhen, Guan Wenjun, 2023.). To advance inclusive education, many countries have formulated their own laws and regulations based on local conditions to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of children with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States emphasizes that "all individuals aged 3-21, regardless of the type or severity of their disability, have the right to a free appropriate public education." (Xia Ying, 2006) In Germany, two pieces of legislation—the Federal Social Assistance Law and the Child and Youth Welfare Law—provide essential legal foundations for preschool inclusive education (Cao Shuqin, 2006).

Although various provinces in China include relevant provisions regarding preschool education for children with disabilities in their local early childhood education regulations—and some stipulations exhibit a degree of innovation and leadership—the implementation of inclusive education concepts remains inadequate. Issues such as insufficiently detailed support policies for preschool inclusion, inconsistencies between certain provisions and higher-level laws continue to be prominent challenges (Zhao Xiaohong, 2021). Therefore, there is an urgent need to promote high-quality development in preschool inclusive education through legislative measures or administrative orders that enforce compliance.

In September 2020, the Ministry of Education released the "Draft Law on Preschool Education of the People's Republic of China (for Public Consultation)," which explicitly states in Article 23 (Special Education) that "various forms of preschool special education should be implemented in a coordinated manner to promote inclusive education. Kindergartens are required to accept preschool children with disabilities who have the capacity for regular education. Special education schools, child welfare institutions, and rehabilitation organizations that meet certain conditions are encouraged and supported to establish kindergartens or preschool classes." The development of inclusive early childhood education holds significant importance for social progress and development. The draft law on preschool education clearly articulates the requirement to advance inclusive education. It is hoped that this law will be promulgated and implemented promptly, facilitating the realization of inclusive educational concepts in early childhood settings and promoting high-quality development in preschool inclusion practices.

To promote the high-quality development of preschool education, it is essential to establish a Chinese characteristic concept of inclusive early childhood education based on the principles of 'education without discrimination, fairness and equality,' 'respecting differences

and prioritizing the child,' and 'caring for inclusivity and embracing integration.' This approach not only meets the fundamental requirements for advancing preschool education but also fulfills the inevitable demand for ensuring that all children receive quality care and nurturing.

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