

# From Theory to Inclusive Practice: Developing Competency-Oriented Curricula for Pre-Service Teacher Education

Liu,Huan

Changshu Institute of Technology, Changshu, Jiangsu, 215500, China  
City University of Macau, Macau, 999078, China

**Abstract:** This study explores the development of practice-oriented curricula to address the challenges of inclusive education, with a focus on China's classrooms. It highlights the preservice stage as a critical period for cultivating teachers' practical competencies, identifying traditional theory-based instruction as insufficient in equipping candidates to manage the complexities of inclusive classrooms.

The curriculum proposed emphasizes the acquisition of practical skills, structured into four core modules: foundational knowledge, understanding the needs of special students, classroom management strategies, and professional collaboration. Contextualized experiences—such as internships, observations, and simulated teaching—are integrated into a progressive learning framework. Formative evaluation methods, including portfolios and critical event analyses, are utilized to ensure continuous competency development.

This approach bridges the gap between theoretical instruction and practical application, fostering pre-service teachers' readiness to deliver equitable and high-quality education in authentic inclusive environments.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education; Practice-Oriented curricula; Pre-service teacher training; Differentiated instruction

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Inclusive education represents a progressive educational concept and practice, advocating for children with special needs to be included in general schools where they receive education and grow alongside their peers. Advancing inclusive education is a crucial approach to improving the enrollment rate of children with disabilities, enhancing the quality of special education, and promoting educational equity. "Learning in regular classrooms" is the localized implementation of inclusive education in China. It refers to an educational placement in which children with special needs are integrated into general classrooms to learn alongside their typically developing peers.

According to the latest statistics from the Development Planning Department of the Ministry of Education, in 2023, China enrolled a total of 155,000 students in various forms of special education, with 912,000 students currently attending special education schools. Among them, 341,200 students (37.42%) are enrolled in special education schools, while 570,800 students (62.58%) attend other schools. The practice of learning in regular classrooms has thus become the primary placement model for special education in China.

China Education Modernization 2035 articulated the goal of "strengthening special education, ensuring universal coverage for school-age children with disabilities, advancing inclusive education comprehensively, and promoting the integration of medical and educational practices." This policy orientations signal that the focus of special education in

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## About the Author

Liu,Huan (1989-), Han nationality, Pizhou, Jiangsu Province, Lecturer at Changshu Institute of Technology, Ph.D. candidate at City University of Macau, specializing in Teacher Education and Applied Psychology.

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China has gradually shifted towards improving quality.

The competencies of teachers in inclusive education constitute a critical factor in determining the quality of inclusive education. The lack of necessary knowledge and skills among frontline teachers has already become a bottleneck restricting the high-quality development of inclusive education in China. Cultivating inclusive education competencies among pre-service teachers during teacher training is simpler and more effective than attempting to shift their beliefs and practices after they have entered the profession. Therefore, it is imperative to develop inclusive education competencies at the pre-service stage, preparing teacher candidates to educate and nurture all children, including those with disabilities, within general classroom environments. This approach addresses the challenges that inclusive education poses to teacher training, enhances the ability of future teachers to effectively implement "learning in regular classrooms," and meets the practical need for teacher competencies in inclusive education. Ultimately, it ensures equitable and quality education for all children, including those with special needs.

## **1. Current Status of Inclusive Education Competency Development Among Regular Pre-service Teacher Candidates**

### **(1) Policy support**

As early as 1989, the Opinions on the Development of Special Education advocated that regular secondary and higher teacher training institutions should systematically introduce elective courses on special education. In the Special Education Enhancement Plan (2014–2016), it was emphasized that "universities should be encouraged to include special education courses in teacher training programs to cultivate the concept of inclusive education and the teaching skills required to support students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms." The plan further specified that "content related to special education should be included in the teacher certification examination," marking the first time that special education competencies were mandated from the perspective of teacher qualification standards. Moreover, the Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards (2022) further highlighted the practical requirements for "differentiated instruction." These policies collectively emphasize that teacher training should go beyond theoretical understanding and focus on cultivating practical skills.

### **(2) Connotations of inclusive education competency**

Existing research generally agrees that qualified general education teachers should possess inclusive education competencies encompassing three dimensions: fundamental concepts and ethics of inclusive education, professional knowledge, and professional skills. Wang Yan et al. (2015) proposed a four-dimensional competency structure for teachers involved in "learning in regular classrooms," comprising professional attitudes, professional knowledge, professional skills, and the capacity to seek and obtain support. The latter specifically refers to the proactive ability of teachers to acquire resources and seek assistance necessary for inclusive education.

The pre-service stage represents a critical period for nurturing future teachers' inclusive education competencies, as their educational philosophies, professional knowledge, teaching methods, and attitudes toward students are being formed and developed. Zhao Meiju et al. (2023) demonstrated that offering special education courses benefits early childhood education undergraduates by fostering positive attitudes toward inclusive education. Exploring practical pathways for developing pre-service teachers' inclusive education competencies within the context of inclusive education is instrumental in equipping regular preservice teacher candidates with the correct philosophy of inclusion, a positive and accepting attitude toward children with special needs, comprehensive knowledge of inclusive education, and robust inclusive teaching skills. Such efforts lay a solid foundation for smooth implementation of inclusive teaching practices in their professional careers.

## **2. Lessons from Inclusive Education Practices in Developed Countries**

Globally, it has become a consensus to include "inclusive education courses" as mandatory components in pre-service teacher education programs. Many countries in Europe and North America have adopted measures such as revising legal frameworks, integrating the management systems of special education and general education, and reforming teacher training models to promote the development of inclusive education, offering valuable insights for China.

The United States was one of the earliest proponents and practitioners of inclusive education. In recent years, its pre-service teacher education model has gradually transitioned from a dual-track system to an integrated approach. Through initiatives such as establishing a priority on education for students with disabilities, fostering co-teaching among educators, strengthening inclusive education internships, and optimizing curriculum structures and content, the United States has cultivated inclusive education teachers with comprehensive knowledge and skill sets. The United Kingdom has focused on "enhancing the training of special education teachers" by incorporating elements of special education into general education. The Professional Standards for Teachers published in 2007 emphasized that qualified general education teachers should possess the basic concepts, knowledge, and skills necessary for inclusive education. Sweden requires all pre-service teachers to undergo a ten-week training program in special education knowledge. Additionally, its 2010 New Education Act underscores the necessity for teachers of all disciplines to acquire special education skills.

## **3. Analysis of Practical Challenges in Developing Inclusive Education Competencies Among Regular Pre-service Teachers**

In 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the National Standards for Undergraduate Program Teaching Quality in General Higher Education Institutions, which explicitly required education majors to include "Introduction to Special Education" as a foundational professional course. This indicates that integrating inclusive education-related courses into general teacher training programs and fostering pre-service teachers' competencies to address the teaching practices involved in "learning in regular classrooms" will become a critical trend and imperative for the reform and enhancement of teacher education in China.

However, empirical research reveals that the current inclusive education courses offered in general teacher training programs in China face various limitations in terms of their nature, objectives, and content. Neglecting the practical aspects of "learning in regular classrooms" and being constrained by the traditional epistemology of technical rationality have led course designers to fail in clearly defining, from a practical perspective, the roles and competency requirements of teachers in "learning in regular classrooms." There is also insufficient emphasis on developing teachers' practical abilities.

The study by Xu Luxi and Wang Yan (2019) observed that while some universities have attempted to overlay inclusive education courses onto basic teacher training curricula and compile textbooks tailored for regular teacher candidates, issues such as imprecise course objectives have resulted in suboptimal outcomes for inclusive education courses. Similarly, Feng Yajing and Li Aifen et al. (2016) identified several issues in existing inclusive education courses, including: Firstly, Insufficient operability and guidance of course objectives, with an overemphasis on special education knowledge and skills; Secondly, Lack of standardized content, with more emphasis on theoretical knowledge than practical skills; Thirdly, Inadequate practical components in course implementation, dominated by lectures, with limited opportunities for practical engagement. Existing practical activities are mostly disconnected from the real-life contexts of "learning in regular classrooms." Fourthly, Limited and biased evaluation methods, lacking comprehensive assessment of practical competencies.

In summary, while universities have introduced inclusive education courses within general teacher training programs under the guidance of laws and policies, the objectives and orientation of these courses show significant misalignment with the practical roles and tasks of frontline teachers involved in "learning in regular classrooms." The lack of practical

focus during course implementation and the oversimplified evaluation methods hinder the development of pre-service teachers' practical competencies for inclusive education. Addressing these issues necessitates prioritizing the enhancement of pre-service teachers' integrated skills within the diverse educational environments of inclusive education. A practice-oriented approach, focusing on constructing and cultivating inclusive education competencies through hands-on experience, is the inevitable solution to overcome these practical challenges.

#### **4. Constructing Practice-Oriented Inclusive Education Curricula for General Teacher Education Students**

Designing practice-oriented general courses for inclusive education is an inevitable choice to address the global trend of inclusive education and to tackle the quality challenges of inclusive classroom settings in China.

Education inherently possesses a strong practical nature. Inclusive education is not merely an educational concept but also an educational practice. It focuses on teachers' ability to create inclusive learning environments in general classrooms that include children with special needs. The competencies required for inclusive education are highly contextual and practical in nature. The theoretical instruction mode of traditional courses fails to equip teacher education students with the ability to address the complex demands of students with special needs in real-world classrooms. Studies have also shown that even if teacher education students master the theories of inclusive education, they may still exhibit anxiety or avoidance behaviors in real classrooms due to a lack of practical experience. Inclusive education demands teachers to possess practical skills such as differentiated instruction and flexible assessment, which must be internalized through practical activities like simulated teaching, case analysis, and field observation. Practice-oriented courses promote knowledge transfer through "learning by doing," helping teacher education students transform theoretical knowledge into actionable strategies.

The role of teachers in inclusive classroom settings is also highly practical. Such teachers need to handle various emergencies triggered by the inclusion of children with special needs, create individualized learning plans for children with different requirements, mediate relationships between children with special needs and their peers, and seek professional support when encountering difficulties. Therefore, the construction of inclusive education courses should fully consider the roles and practical needs of inclusive classroom teachers, aiming to improve the practical capabilities of general education teachers. This ensures that the curriculum genuinely fulfills the requirements of inclusive classroom work and addresses the realistic demands for teachers' competencies.

##### **(1) Course objectives oriented towards practical competence**

The fundamental objective of general inclusive education courses is to enhance the practical competence of general teacher education students in inclusive classroom settings, rather than to develop their theoretical expertise in special education. Therefore, course objectives should directly address the practical needs of inclusive education in China.

Firstly, the course should foster teacher education students' positive attitudes and beliefs towards inclusive education. Through real-life experiential learning, it should promote their emotional acceptance of students with special needs and recognition of educational ethics. Secondly, it aims to enhance their practical capabilities in inclusive education. This includes mastering skills for designing and implementing differentiated instruction, such as curriculum adjustments and layered task design; improving their ability to handle emergencies, such as managing the behaviors of students with special needs or resolving classroom conflicts; and strengthening future teachers' resource coordination abilities, such as seeking professional support (e.g., resource teachers and itinerant support teams) and integrating resources from families, schools, and communities. Thirdly, the course seeks to reconstruct the perception of teachers' roles in inclusive education, clarifying the responsibilities of general teachers and breaking the traditional mindset of "segregated education." It should cultivate a collaborative mindset and an understanding of role boundaries and mechanisms within support systems.

## **(2) Course content based on practical needs**

The course content should go beyond the conventional framework of special education disciplines and be constructed around the practical demands of inclusive education in China, structured into four key modules.

### **1) Foundational cognition of inclusive education module**

This module includes a review of the development of inclusive education both domestically and internationally, an analysis of the evolution of inclusive education principles, global trends, and China's policy framework. It aims to deepen teacher education students' understanding of the background and values of inclusion, fostering value recognition and a positive attitude towards inclusive education. Additionally, it addresses the operational mechanisms of inclusive education support systems, including resource classroom management, itinerant guidance models, and the functions of regional resource centers, helping students understand the collaborative logic of diverse support networks.

### **2) Educational needs of special students module**

This module focuses on the analysis of typical disabilities, emphasizing common groups in inclusive classrooms, such as students with autism and intellectual disabilities. It particularly examines how their disabilities affect learning in general classrooms, avoiding overemphasis on pathological characteristics. Tools such as Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) are introduced to train students in problem diagnosis and needs identification.

### **3) Classroom management strategies module**

This module covers differentiated instructional techniques, including curriculum adjustment strategies (e.g., goal layering and content simplification), multi-sensory teaching methods, and cooperative learning models. It introduces behavior management toolkits, such as Positive Behavior Support (PBS), token economies, and self-monitoring sheets. Moreover, it explains home-school-community collaboration mechanisms, enabling students to design parent workshop plans and community resource integration pathways.

### **4) Resource utilization and professional collaboration module**

This module requires teacher education students to master cross-professional collaboration processes, simulating scenarios such as IEP meetings and collaborative lesson planning with resource teachers to build teamwork skills. They should also become proficient in using technology support systems, such as special education cloud platforms and digital assessment tools. This module emphasizes a "problem-strategy" logic, focusing on skill acquisition rather than knowledge accumulation to align with the career development needs of general teacher education students.

## **(3) Emphasizing contextualized experiences in curriculum implementation**

According to Situated Learning Theory, professional knowledge and skills should be developed within authentic or simulated communities of practice. Inclusive education courses can utilize inter-school collaboration, internships, and observational opportunities to allow teacher education students to observe, imitate, and reflect on inclusive education practices in real-world teaching scenarios. Practice-oriented curriculum implementation should rely on authentic or simulated settings, constructing a progressive learning pathway of "observation-participation-leadership." Through immersive internships in frontline schools, students can enrich their sensory understanding. Structured observations can be conducted to record critical events such as the behavior of children with special needs in inclusive settings, interactions among teachers, special children, and their peers, ultimately forming analytical reports. Teacher education students can also participate as "teaching assistants" in individualized instruction, assisting resource teachers in operating evaluation tools. Instructors may use teaching records and analyses of student works to guide reflective practice among teacher education students, enabling evidence-based improvements.

#### (4) Prioritizing formative evaluation with focus on practical competencies

The practice-oriented nature of general inclusive education courses necessitates a dynamic and multifaceted evaluation system that goes beyond the limitations of traditional written tests. Combining formative and summative assessments, the curriculum underscores the "learning by doing" concept and uses evidence of competency as core evaluation criteria to ensure the attainment of course objectives.

Growth portfolios for teacher education students can be established, including their internship journals, teaching reflections, records of communication with special students, parents, and peers, and other process-oriented materials to track their development in inclusive education competencies. Additionally, critical event analysis, such as evaluating how students handle emergency behaviors of children with special needs, can assess their problem-solving abilities. Real-time feedback during classroom instruction can further observe teacher education students' attitudes and practical capabilities in inclusive education, with immediate scoring in group discussions, simulated teaching, and other activities.

### 5. Conclusion

The construction of practice-oriented inclusive education courses is an essential reform in teacher education programs, aligning with the global movement toward inclusive education and addressing the practical needs of inclusive classroom settings in China. By systematically optimizing course objectives, content design, implementation strategies, and evaluation systems, such curricula can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence for pre-service teachers.

This approach not only responds to the professional development needs of general teacher education students but also contributes to promoting educational equity and improving the quality of education. It equips future teachers with the necessary skills, attitudes, and competencies to create inclusive learning environments, ensuring that every child, regardless of their unique needs, can access quality education.

Going forward, it is critical to enhance policy support, integrate resources, and strengthen the collaboration among schools, families, and communities to make inclusive education a normalized and sustainable practice. Together, these efforts can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable education system, fostering a learning environment where every child feels valued and supported.

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