



# Inclusive Education in Primary Schools in Remote Areas in China: Perspectives from Practitioners, Children, and Parents

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## Abstract

The following dissertation presents a research proposal aimed at exploring inclusive education in primary schools located in remote areas of China from the perspectives of students, educators (teachers), and parents. The concept of inclusive education has gained popularity and has been effectively implemented in many countries. However, in certain economically or educationally disadvantaged regions of China, inclusive education has not been successfully established. The researchers seek to understand the attitudes of these three distinct groups regarding issues related to inclusive education and to investigate whether inclusive education can be effectively implemented in remote areas. This research project employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. This project contributes to the advancement of inclusive education in China and provides valuable insights and a foundation for further research into the development of inclusive education in specific regions.

## Keywords

Inclusive education; primary school; remote areas

## Introduction

The concept of inclusive education has not been out of sight since the Salamanca Conference in 1994. A range of international organizations have launched activities to support the development of inclusive education. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to eliminate all forms of discrimination and foster social cohesion. Inclusive education therefore pays special attention to those who are vulnerable and marginalized, seeking to develop the potential of all individuals and to achieve equality in education for all. However, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), approximately 97 percent of people with physical, emotional, intellectual, or mental disabilities have never been in a classroom and have not acquired the basic knowledge and skills given in school (UNESCO, 2005). The current global strategy has not significantly improved access to school for children with special needs, and there are still many children with special needs who are not benefiting from the promise of the Salamanca Conference (Xu, 2012). In 2007, World Vision UK reported in a study that at least 26 million school-age children with special needs were out of school in some developing countries (Xu, 2012).

We must recognize that the definition of inclusive education is complex and implementing the concept is a never-ending process (Armstrong, 2015; Jasna, 2018). Although there are successful examples of inclusive education in some countries and cities, the implementation of inclusive education still faces difficulties in some areas that lack awareness,

policy, and financial support, while at the same time, children with special educational needs still face pressures and challenges in being integrated into mainstream schools. In the opposite direction, all realistic investments in inclusive education depend on a shared vision of inclusive education development (Xu, 2012). Parents, teachers, and other stakeholders must work together to make inclusion work (Vanderpuye, 2013).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the success of inclusive education implementation in areas of the country with low levels of educational and economic development from the perspective of parents, practitioners, and students through three research questions:

- 1) To what extent is it effective to implement IE in remote areas of China?
- 2) Can primary schools in remote areas of China accept all students with special educational needs from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds?
- 3) What are the specific problems and pressures faced by primary schools for implementing IE in remote cities in China?

The results of this project bring valuable information to the research of inclusive education in China and provide clues and a basis for related fields to explore the work of inclusive education in remote areas of China.

This master's thesis consists of six main chapters. The first chapter reviews the previous literature and introduces the research direction of this paper. In addition, this chapter outlines the specific objectives of this study and presents three main research questions. The second chapter is the methodological section, which specifies the design ideas and methods of this research project. The next chapter is a specific analysis of the required data. Chapter 4 describes two aspects, including the strategy for sample collection and the time, resources, and budget required for the project. The fifth chapter focuses on the ethical considerations in the research process, and it also describes the ways and means of publicizing this study. The last chapter concludes the entire research project.

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1 Basic theory of inclusive education

#### 1.1.1 Origin of the concept

The concept of inclusive education emerged in the 1990s, it has been supported and developed by three international educational conferences. In 1990, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proposed, the World Declaration on Education for All at the World Conference on Education for All, which emphasized that education is a fundamental right of the human person and the purpose of education for all is to meet the basic learning needs of all people. At the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain, UNESCO re-emphasized the fundamental right of every person to education and the uniqueness and diversity of the individual. Schools should accommodate all students and meet their special educational needs. The Salamanca Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly, formally proposed "inclusive education" and called for extensive practice around the world, which could greatly benefit international education development (Huang, 2004). In 2008, UNESCO's International Conference on Education was held in Geneva with the theme of "Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future". It advocated the recognition of multiple forms of exclusion in society and education and expected the development and implementation of new policies to build inclusive societies in order to achieve lifelong learning for all people.

#### 1.1.2 Definition

Inclusive education (IE) has received continuous development in many countries and regions after the Above three conferences, which resulted in increasing applications of inclusive education by education departments and schools. However, the definition of IE is still controversial based on (Stubbs, 2008).

At the 1994 Salamanca Conference, UNESCO addressed the aim/goal of inclusive education is to satisfy the diverse needs of all students through encouraging participation in learning, culture, and community and finally reducing exclusion in receiving education. The educational system is responsible for providing all school-age children with education opportunities by referring to the contents, methods, structures, and strategies proposed by inclusive education (UNESCO, 2005). However, Stubbs (2008) argued that this definition refers to all children rather than all age learners. He suggested that inclusion is for all, but not a specific group, which should also involve school improvement, cultural and policy reconfiguration, learner diversity, the right to education, and mutually supportive relationships between schools and communities. Therefore, Stubb (2008) proposed a broader definition: inclusive education emphasizes life-long learning. The communities and systems in any culture or context should eliminate exclusion, embrace diversity, and encourage learning and participation. As a result, the final goal is to create a peaceful, equitable society that can meet the basic needs of all learners and ensure their rights can be fully guaranteed (p. 40). Similarly, Armstrong (2015) stated that inclusive education

targets at reduction and elimination of inequalities for people with different backgrounds in receiving education.

It has been argued that the definition of inclusive education proposed by UNESCO is difficult to grasp and that its content is both broad and complex, others believe that definitions of inclusive education are too idealistic and difficult to translate into policies for implementation (Zhou, 2008). As a result, the International Bureau of Education has held nine regional conferences to further explain and promote inclusive education, which is increasingly recognized as an important pathway to equitable and high-quality education. Schools need to be reformed, philosophies need to be updated, pedagogy needs to be improved, and the education system needs to explore different ways to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities (Zhou, 2008, p. 16). All these needs are enough to show that "inclusion" is not easy in the development process, and its complexity and breadth have led to varying views and perspectives in the exploration.

### 1.1.3 From "special" to "inclusion": Comparison between UK and China

The development of inclusive education broadly follows the path from special children to disadvantaged groups and then to all children (Ni & Li, 2019, p. 121). Traditionally, inclusive education is believed to be simply a form of special education that only accepts disabled students. However, inclusive education is not an alias for special education; it is not just about specific groups, but about equity in education and the improvement of the education system as a whole (Stubbs, 2008, p. 38). The specific group here refers to the group of people with special educational needs (SEN), and special education is defined as a program to address educational injustice by providing different forms of educational services to learners with different special needs. It is a mechanism through which students with special needs are included or excluded from the ordinary forms of schooling (Florian, 2008). In other words, it means providing a separate space for SEN learners (including physical disabilities, and mental disabilities) and educating them in isolation. A special school is a learning space for SEN learners. Learners can receive additional support and assistance, such as teachers who pass on knowledge and information to deaf students through sign language. However, from the perspective of inclusive education, these children are also encouraged to be involved in ordinary schools so as not to be labeled as "special". Most importantly, inclusive education aims to eliminate discrimination and exclusion to create an inclusive society where everyone is welcome. (Huang, 2004). While, many scholars disagree with the two concepts of special education and inclusive education because they believe that special education can provide learners with professional education, which can benefit their mental growth and help them build self-confidence. Others hold the opposite view that special education dominated by special modes has been inherently stigmatized, which is disrespectful to human rights (Zhang, 2018). They should be allowed to enter mainstream classrooms and study with peers because this is their basic right (Zhang, 2018). There has been a debate in the British educational community about the "special" and "inclusive" education since the Salamanca Declaration. Indeed, special education in the UK with over 100 history still faces many challenges even though remarkable achievements have been scored, such as the elimination of discrimination and stigmatization for children with special needs (Pi et al., 2020). In order to further improve the current special education pattern, the British government introduced a complete reform bill to establish a more mature special education management system. For example, the 1997 Green Paper (Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs) and the White Paper (Excellence in Schools) issued in the same year made it clear that special education schools should continue to play a vital role in the inclusive education system. In 2001, the Special Education Needs and Disability Act declared that mainstream schools were the mainstay of inclusive education, emphasizing the protection of the rights of children and parents with special needs (Pi, 2020, p. 102).

In the late 1970s, the two education models of "special and inclusive" were formally integrated in the UK, which means the segregated special education model was broken down and students from special schools were involved in mainstream schools (Pi, 2020; Yang, 2017). However, nowadays, the majority of countries have a "dual system" of education, which means that mainstream schools offer general education, whereas special schools offer instruction tailored to special needs, such as the sign language instruction mentioned earlier (Yang & Yuan, 2017). In China, although inclusive education has been accepted and applied into practice in some major cities, the understanding of "inclusive" seems to be narrowly defined (Huang, 2004). In a more general view, inclusive education only addresses the problems of learners with SEN. Therefore, the "dualistic education system" (Complete separation of special education and general education) has been deeply rooted in people's consciousness with their unique cultural characteristics. Although great improvement in education integration has been achieved in developed countries, such as the UK, the establishment of a new inclusive education system worldwide (Huang, 2008) still requires long-term efforts and persistence (Huang, 2008).

### 1.1.4 The importance of inclusive education

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes that education is a fundamental right of the human person. Inclusive education means that all people have an equal right to education without exclusion (Stubbs, 2008; Xu, 2011). Inclusive education is important because it is an essential component of an equitable society that upholds human rights

and human dignity (Amstrong, 2015) Although it is an ongoing and long-term process, inclusive education is important from multiple perspectives. Next, I will discuss the importance of inclusive education from three perspectives, including philosophical, sociological, and psychological:

#### (1) Philosophical perspective

Marx pointed out that "putting people first" is a necessary requirement for education (Huang, 2011, p. 8). Specifically, it respects the rights and dignity of each person, recognizes individual differences, and emphasizes the value of each person, which can be achieved through inclusive education since it emphasizes that human beings are the subject of education. Inclusive education emphasizes respecting each student, valuing each student, understanding each student, exploring the potential of each student, and striving to make each student realize himself/herself by taking his/her individual development as the premise (Huang, 2011; Feng, 2007). This is the embodiment of "putting people first".

#### (2) Sociological perspective

"Equality" is always an ethical value pursued by human beings because of the long-term inequality that poor people suffer in many countries and regions (Huang, 2011; Feng 2007). As a result, these people cannot have equal access to education due to race, gender, economy, and social status. With the development of society and economy, the consciousness of equality about education is gaining ground and everyone wants to have the opportunity to receive education. Whilst the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encourages people to be confident in upholding equal rights. Meanwhile, people in different countries raised the banner of "democratization of education", which brings the development of equality in education to a climax (Feng, 2007, p. 21).

Although the right to education has been extended from privileged groups to ordinary mortals, the goal of social equality has not been achieved. It means that the educational structure, educational outcomes, and economic results of the country have not deeply changed (Feng, 2007, p. 23). Therefore, inclusive education was finally proposed with a core of equity and equality and committed to "enhancing participation and reducing exclusion". The new concept of inclusive education pays special attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups and seeks to develop the full potential of all individuals (Xu, 2012, p. 4). Eliminating all discrimination and fostering social cohesion is the ultimate goal of inclusive education.

#### (3) Psychological perspective

The traditional concept of education addressed that only learners with a certain level of intelligence have access to education (Huang, 2011; Feng, 2007). Piaget's theory argues that human intelligence is directly related to the development of language and logical thinking (Huang, 2011; Feng, 2007). This traditional theory of intelligence is based on IQ tests which serve as a way to test students' abilities. The intelligence level of students determines whether they can be accepted or rejected by the school (Wang, 2003). However, the view of inclusive education holds the opposite view that all learners have potential abilities. Therefore, the purpose of inclusive education is to recognize individual differences and eliminate discrimination. Overall, inclusive education is significant in promoting the coordinated development of various abilities and further improving the quality of students (Huang, 2011; Feng, 2007).

## 1.2 Previous studies

### 1.2.1 Foreign studies: Attitude of related personnel towards IE

Due to the widespread dissemination of the concept of inclusive education Various countries and regions have launched a series of research and explorations around IE. Experts have also conducted some studies on the effective implementation of IE.

#### (1) Teachers' attitudes toward IE practices

Stubbs (2008) believes that attitudes are a combination of values and beliefs and that attitudes directly influence the development of inclusive educational practices. Positive attitudes can contribute to the continued development of IE, while negative attitudes can hinder the practice. In previous studies, most researchers have targeted their research on teachers' attitudes. As the main participants in the process of IE, it is clear that the attitudes of teachers will provide some help to the practice of IE.

According to Moberg (2020) and Yada (2017), teachers play a key role in the actual practice of IE. They all agreed that although the majority of teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusive education, there were still some who were anxious about the effective implementation of IE, and teachers' attitudes were influenced by a number of relevant variables. Yada (2017) utilities that teachers' attitudes are influenced by variables related to the student and the educational environment, specifically the nature of the student's disability and the availability of human or material support. Moberg (2020) also suggested that in addition to the type of disability, these variables may also be related to experience with inclusive education, meaning that teachers with experience in inclusive education are more likely than teachers without experience to hold positive attitudes. Besides that, both scholars mentioned in their articles that as more students with special

educational needs are included in mainstream classrooms, teachers inevitably suffer from psychological stress and negative attitudes due to a lack of expertise and skills in this area. In terms of methodology, Yada (2017) used a questionnaire format to survey 359 in-service Japanese teachers and compared the results with previous studies conducted in other countries and found that Japanese teachers had lower levels of self-efficacy than South Africa and Finland and felt higher anxiety about including children with disabilities in the classroom. He therefore concluded that changing teachers' attitudes requires improving their self-efficacy and equipping them with the expertise and skills to be competent in inclusive education. Yada's study also has limitations. The quantitative data generated from the questionnaire alone are not sufficient to provide readers with a more specific picture of teachers' attitudes toward IE and self-efficacy. Therefore, in my study, in addition to collecting data with questionnaires, more in-depth interviews with participants would be more useful to answer my research questions. Compared with Yada (2017), the study of Moberg et al. (2020) seems to be more interesting. They chose Finland and Japan, two countries that have common and different points in their educational systems and cultures, to compare and analyze. The study found that IE was accepted with caution in both countries, but there were differences in teachers' attitudes in practice. Specifically, Japanese teachers were more willing to accept students with behavioral and intellectual problems because they were concerned about the negative labeling of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Conversely, Finnish teachers are more willing to accept children with physical disabilities. The reason for this difference is related to the cultural background and history of inclusive education in both countries.

Combining these two pieces of literature yields the fact that not all children with special educational needs are accepted into mainstream classrooms. Teachers' attitudes toward IE will vary depending on the nature of the students' special needs. Also, it will vary depending on the historical background of IE and the cultural awareness of IE in different countries or regions. In addition, Clipa (2020) offered a more complete view of teachers' attitudes toward IE. He argued that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education vary depending on several factors: previous experience, level of training, type of SEN students, teacher self-efficacy, and inclusion practices.

#### (2) Challenges of IE: Lack of professional knowledge and skills of teachers

Yada (2017) believes that to successfully implement inclusive teaching, it is necessary to have a positive attitude towards inclusive education as well as certain professional knowledge and skills. However, previous research has found teachers to be lacking in this skill, teachers do not have sufficient expertise and capacity to manage different types of SEN students. The lack of additional support or training may be the reason for the low levels of self-efficacy and inclusive attitudes among teachers (Yada, 2017; Moberg, 2020). Similarly, Yada (2017) and Florian (2010) found that teachers in many regions, including the UK, were unable to work with students in inclusive classrooms because of a lack of inclusive knowledge and skills. Furthermore, because they are not trained enough, their level (expertise and capacity to manage different types of SEN students) is not sufficient to be inclusive. As a result, improving teachers' knowledge and skills is the key to developing the IE. However, the specific knowledge and skills that teachers are expected to train or improve are not mentioned in this literature. Hence, there is a need for further research on the specific skills or knowledge that teachers need to acquire in their IE practices.

#### (3) Parents' attitudes towards IE

With regard to the implementation of IE, there is a lot of literature abroad that addresses the issue of attitudes, this is because a positive attitude is conducive to the effective implementation of inclusive education (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). The practice of inclusive education necessarily involves three different groups of people: teachers, parents, and students. As guardians, parents have the right to make choices for their children and to express their views in the practice of IE. Sharma and Trory (2019) shared the same view, that parents are important partners in the development of a more inclusive education system. They not only influence the development process and standards of practice in IE but also support children with special educational needs to participate in and benefit from the educational experience. The common finding of both Paseka (2020) and Sharma (2019) in their studies was that parents were very supportive of IE and showed a welcoming attitude towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs. Furthermore, both authors suggested that schools or educational institutions should involve parents more in the practice of IE. This is because communication and cooperation with parents are conducive to the improvement and enhancement of inclusive education in terms of methods and strategies, thus laying a good foundation for the successful implementation of IE.

In addition, there were some different but valuable findings in the study of the two experts and their partners. Semi-structured telephone interviews with 2,000 parents from all German federal states in the study by Paseka and Schwab (2020) showed that parents had more positive attitudes toward students with physical disabilities or learning disabilities than toward students with emotional or behavioral disorders. It is worth noting that among these parents, there are parents with children in regular classes (no SEN students) and those with children in inclusive classes (SEN students). Besides that, parents whose children were in inclusive classes perceived greater inclusion than parents whose children were in

regular classes. Sharma and Trory (2019) used purposive sampling to survey parents of ordinary children and parents of children with special needs in Thailand separately. The results showed that parents of ordinary children believed that inclusive classes taught their children to understand and help others, and were very willing to cooperate with inclusive education practices. Parents of children with special educational needs were more concerned about the safety and dignity of their children in inclusive classrooms, and they felt that mainstream teachers needed special training to effectively manage inclusive classroom environments and help their children live in harmony and happiness.

### 1.2.2 Domestic research: The practice of IE in China and the challenges it faces

There is little research about inclusive education in China when compared to other countries. Some experts discussed the problems and analyzed the current situation of the development of IE in China.

#### (1) Learning in regular class

Due to the specific situation of each country and the different understanding of the idea of IE, the practice process of implementing IE varies from country to country according to (Huang, 2004). China has experienced a long process of change in the development of IE. From segregated special schools to inclusive classes for children with special needs, the development of IE in China is reflected (Gan, 2010). After the 1980s, inclusive education for children with disabilities was introduced to China, mainly in the form of "learning in regular class". This means that more exceptional children had the opportunity to be accepted by regular schools and receive education with typical developed children (Gan, 2010; Deng, 2013). Gan (2010) and Deng (2013) believe that the model of "learning in regular class" has achieved some success in the practice of inclusive education. Specifically, this model not only increases the enrollment rate of disabled children in the stage of compulsory education but also promotes the physical and mental development of children with disabilities.

At the same time, a number of studies have been conducted about the attitudes of teachers and peers of children with special educational needs toward their "learning in the regular classroom". Jiang et al. (2013) used a self-administered questionnaire to survey 442 students in four remote primary school classes in Chongqing. The study found that the children were more willing to accept students with SEN. They were more willing to accept students with visual impairment and intellectual disability than other types of special needs children. Moreover, the personalities and behaviors of special needs children determine whether can be accepted by their peers. On the other hand, Zhang (2016) found that teachers showed less positive attitudes toward "learning in regular class" because teachers were concerned that children with special needs might be unable to keep up in the mainstream classroom. Apart from that, the teachers' lack of awareness and professional training led to the inability of classroom management. However, it is worth noting that the authors only interviewed 12 teachers in general schools in three different cities and cannot present the opinions of all teachers in the workforce. The sample scale may pose an impact on the reliability of data. Admittedly, the findings of the three cities and sample scale also reflect some differences. For example, there is a significant difference in the level of awareness of "learning in regular class" between urban and county practitioners of IE. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research on inclusive education practices in different areas.

#### (2) Difficulties and challenges in practice

In the past 20 years, China has developed a more complete model of inclusive education (Gan, 2010, p. 84) since the introduction of "learning in regular class" for children with disabilities. However, there are still a series of difficulties and challenges in the process of implementing inclusive education. Firstly, the inadequate domestic support system for IE has led to differences in the understanding of IE by practitioners and related scholars (Gan, 2010). Specifically, there is no specific policy or regulation to support the implementation and development of inclusive education in China except a policy named "learning in regular class", which is less authoritative and influential. The lack of supportive policy has led to practitioners' misunderstanding of inclusive education when it comes to the difference between inclusive education and special education (Guo, 2021; Gan, 2010). Secondly, Guo (2021) and Ma (2017) argued that teachers should develop professional skills to meet the different learning needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Because the teachers may be less competitive when compared with the others who are skilled at promoting the mental and physical development of exceptional students in IE classrooms.

Finally, children with special needs may be rejected by mainstream classrooms. A number of studies found that special needs students who are studying in regular classes are confronted with being excluded from class, and some are even at risk of being withdrawn. Although they are ostensibly provided the opportunity to get access to mainstream classrooms, these children remain to be marginalized due to lacking of professional training for teachers (Guo, 2021; Ma, 2017).

Previous papers have mainly studied the practice of inclusive education on a large scale, rather than focusing on some specific areas. Although a nationwide study has its advantages, such as a broader scope of popularization and wider usability, it ignores the actual situation of each region, including the actual economic development and geographical conditions. Because of the differences in economic and educational development, the results of these large-scale studies

are somewhat crude and not sufficiently detailed. In contrast, this research will be narrowed down and focused on remote areas that are lagging behind in economic and educational development. In addition, I will combine the opinions of three important groups, namely practitioners, students, and teachers, to conduct a more in-depth discussion on the issues related to local inclusive education. The results of the study will be more focused and detailed than those of a large-scale study.

### 1.3 Research questions

The purpose of this study will be to investigate the effectiveness of implementing IE in primary schools in a remote area of China (Nanchong City as an example) and the specific difficulties that will be encountered in the process of implementation. An additional aim of this project is to figure out which types of students with special learning needs are accepted in mainstream classrooms and which types are less likely to be included. In addition, the ability of local teachers to meet the diverse needs of students with special learning needs is also an objective examined in this project. In light of these objectives, the study will address the following questions:

- 1) To what extent is it effective to implement IE in remote areas of China?
- 2) Can primary schools in remote areas of China accept all students with special educational needs from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds?
- 3) What are the specific problems and pressures faced by primary schools for implementing IE in remote cities in China?

## 2. Methodology

The mixed method will be used in this study. This is because the mixed method combines the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods and minimizes the disadvantages (Bryman, 2016). The studies on inclusive education practices in the literature review only used a single questionnaire or interviews. Although the research results also present some important findings, some complex issues are never better explained. As suggested by Bryman (2016), mixed methods can enhance the integrity of findings and provide readers with a better interpretation than a single method. The same argument has been made by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) that the mixed method involves the use of both methods, making the overall intensity of the study greater than if one of the methods is used alone. Thus, the mixed methods will not only help me collect statistically significant data but will also allow me to obtain deeper and richer answers to my research questions through the descriptive data obtained in the following interviews.

### 2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is an extensively recognized tool for researchers (Greig et al., 2013). It can not only provide a large amount of factual data but can also be designed quickly and easily for analysis (Greig et al., 2013). Hence, in this study, I will use a questionnaire to collect the important data that I need. The questionnaire will be developed with a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, with the aim of making the entire questionnaire guided while giving participants the opportunity to express their subjective feelings. Because the participants came from different groups, the questionnaire was designed separately. In addition, these questionnaires were set as online questionnaires for the convenience of the participants, and the researcher distributed the link to the questionnaire to the participants via WeChat. Students can open the link and complete the questionnaire independently with the guidance of their parents.

#### 2.1.1 Questionnaire for students

In order to ensure the questionnaire was suitable for primary school students, adjustments were made in terms of word number. A total of 8 questions were included in the questionnaire. The first seven questions were designed in YES or NO format. The eighth questions require students to give some descriptive answers. The following is a demonstration of the questionnaire (see Table 1).

Researchers showed that concise grammar and sentences let children to be relaxed and comfortable when processing information (Bell, 2007). Hence, the format and questions of the questionnaire are relatively simple and clear. In addition, it is important to present a brief introduction at the beginning of the questionnaire, which it can help prepare for the questions (Bell, 2007, p. 463). Finally, sensitive questions, such as "Who do I like least to be friends with," should be asked in a straightforward manner because children tend to present their answers more directly than one might expect (Bell, 2007, p. 463).

**Table 1. Questionnaire for students**

Dear students, have you ever met a child with special needs in your classroom? They may be students with intellectual problems or physical disabilities, or they may be students with eccentric personalities and emotional difficulties. Would you like to be friends with them? Please talk about your feelings based on the following questions:
1. I think all my peers (even the students I don't like) should be educated by the school.
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
2. I would like to learn with children with disabilities
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
3. I am willing to accept classmates who are grumpy and have strange personalities.
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
(4) I would like to make friends with poor children and help with their studies
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
(5) I think students with intellectual and hearing problems cannot keep up with studies.
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
(6) I think students with ADHD can disrupt classroom discipline.
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
(7) Student A often bullies other classmates, sometimes physically assaulting other peers. He /She has not repented despite repeated criticism and education by the teacher. I think this student should be excluded.
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
(8) What type of students that I do not want to study with?

### 2.1.2 Questionnaire for parents

Compared to the students' questionnaire, the parents' questionnaire appeared to be more complex in design. The parental questionnaire was divided into four sections (A-D).

Section A was used to collect basic information about the parents, such as their gender, age range, and educational background.

Section B mainly focused on parents' awareness and understanding of IE, including their perceptions about the benefits of IE and general attitudes towards participation in IE. The 5 items in this part of the questionnaire were in the format of a four-point Likert scale, in which 4 meant strongly agree, 3 and 2 represented agree and disagree, respectively, and 1

indicated strongly disagree. The collected data was used to answer the first research question.

Section C is primarily used to answer the second research question, but also contributes to the first research question. This section aims to clarify parents' attitudes towards different types of SEN children entering mainstream classrooms. In addition, they include some parental feelings and opinions about the implementation of IE in schools.

Section D was set as open-ended questions. In this section, parents were invited to describe their concerns about the types of SEN children that are least acceptable and their concerns about the implementation of IE. The purpose was to benefit the second and third research questions. Furthermore, the open-ended questions in this section were designed to allow parents to be more flexible and opinionated in expressing their views and lay a foundation for future interviews. For instance, in-depth interviews were conducted based on the types of SEN students that are acceptable to parents.

### 2.1.3 Questionnaire for teachers

The questionnaire for teachers also included 4 sections. Part A concentrated on the collection of basic information about participants, including gender, age range, years of teaching experience, and the subjects they are responsible for teaching. The second part was used to collect the teachers' knowledge and participation in inclusive education. The 5 items in this section of the questionnaire were also in a four-point scale format, in which 4, 3, 2, and 1 represented always, often, sometimes, and never, respectively. The Likert scale was applied into use in part C, which showed the same design as the parent questionnaire. A total of 10 items were used to figure out teachers' attitudes towards SEN children and IE practices. The final section also provided three quiz questions for teachers relating to their own practical experience. The questions were presented as follows:

- 1) What types of special needs students have you encountered?
- 2) Which type of special needs student is the most difficult for you to accept?
- 3) What do you think is the biggest difficulty that hinders the development of inclusive education?

These open-ended questions not only benefited the second and third research questions but also helped the researcher with deeper interviews based on the different responses from the teachers.

Overall, the advantage of the questionnaire is not only easy for researchers to design and analyze quickly but also a good way to obtain factual data and opinions (Greig et al., 2013). The limitation is that those who choose to respond may not be representative of the total sample surveyed. In addition, researchers cannot always get the expected response rate (Greg, 2013). Another disadvantage is that some participants may refuse to answer because of the sensitivity of these questions.

## 2.2 Focus group

In this section, a group of children were invited for further interviews. Group discussion was more suitable for primary school students when compared with individual interviews. According to (Bryman, 2016), a focus group is a form of group interview that provides children with a flexible and free space to discuss a specific topic. As Liamputtong (2016) suggested, a relaxed and non-threatening environment allows participants to feel comfortable sharing their views without fear of criticism.

The focus group activities were divided into four phases, and the purpose of these activities was to explore the second research question in detail and depth. In other words, it aimed to investigate the attitudes of primary school students towards accepting children with SEN. The focus group collected children's thoughts and feelings which were listed below:

- A. What does 'inclusion' mean in your opinion? Who should be involved?
- B. What exceptional children are accommodated in your classroom? Which ones are rejected?
- C. What are the reasons that lead to the rejection of these special needs students?
- D. Which of the rejected special needs children would you most like to accept? Are there any good ways you can help them to be accepted by others?

Firstly, the children were invited to an activity room to meet each other and introduce themselves briefly. There was a warm-up session before the group discussion, the purpose of which was to let children feel relaxed. After the introduction section, the children were divided into six groups to discuss topic A which is the second phase. The third stage was a 15-minute short film about the history and development of inclusive education and some interview notes on special needs children who want to enter mainstream schools. Afterwards, the children were asked to share their experiences with their group members about how they got along with these special children. The fourth phase should be the most popular section among the children because each student will receive an apple-patterned mini sticker and 12 cartoon head stickers. Meanwhile, each focus group received a poster as an answer sheet on which the children worked on specific questions (question BCD) posed by the researchers.

The different cartoon avatars on the posters represent different types of special needs students. For example, the first student was labeled as 'intellectual disability'. The children were asked to categorize the corresponding cartoon stickers into the "Acceptance" house or the "Rejection" house through group discussion. As a result, information about which types of SEN children that are popular or not among their peers can be collected. After that, the children were asked to discuss and explain the reasons for the rejection of these students. In this way, questions B and C can be solved. Finally, the children were asked to choose a type of student in the "rejection" room by placing the "energy fruit" (the apple sticker mentioned above) on the avatar of the student and telling the researcher how he or she would help this student be accepted by everyone. In this case, question D is solved.

The focus group process was relaxed and enjoyable. In addition to the discussion section, some small props were also added to the whole activity. The researchers were involved in this activity to act as a moderator and provide the children with appropriate guidance and support. It should be noted that the participants should be provided with enough time for discussion (Bryman, 2016). In summary, the focus groups helped me to obtain abundant information and the four questions (namely, A, B, C, and D) were all completed in this section. As Liamputtong (2016) suggested, focus groups can collect participants' different understandings and interpretations of the same topic. Moreover, participants' real reactions and attitudes during the discussion were recorded.

However, focus groups have their limitations. discussions can be easily off-topic because of lacking of appropriate guidance. Besides, some data may be lost during focus group discussions due to uncontrollable factors, such as murmurs or inaudible sounds (Bryman, 2016, p. 520).

### 2.3 Semi-structured interview

This section was further investigated with semi-structured interviews with participants from both parent and teacher groups. The reason for using semi-structured interviews is because it is flexible and open enough. Especially when dealing with sensitive topics, this flexible conversation helps researchers get richer information (Bryman, 2016). The research questions in this study include some sensitive topics, such as parents' attitudes towards children with SEN, the function of semi-structured interviews is to enable the conversation (between participants and researchers) to proceed smoothly. Beyond that, the semi-structured interview is a life-oriented interview where the conversation pattern is mainly based on storytelling and understanding of events (Bryman, 2016), this model helps to explain and analyze the questions in the questionnaire in more depth. Thus, it is appropriate to use semi-structured interviews to further investigate my research questions.

#### 2.3.1 Semi-structured interview for parents

Interviews are arranged during parents' free time, such as weekends. To ensure the quality of the interviews, the conversations were conducted one-on-one. In addition, considering the efficiency of the interview, the whole process should not exceed 30 minutes. The interview revolves around two aspects. On the one hand, it provides supplements and explanations for the choices made in the questionnaire, the other side are detailed descriptions of related topics. For example, parents were asked to provide explanations for the typical questions in the questionnaire. The following is a demonstration of a typical item in the questionnaire, "For those bullies who regularly participate in school bullying, schools should exclude them." Assuming that the parent's choice is d (Strongly agree), he/she will be asked to explain the reasons for choosing this item. In addition to explanations of typical closed-ended questions, parents will be asked to answer extended questions from open-ended questions.

Here is the first question in section D of the questionnaire, "As a parent, please talk about the type of SEN child that you think would be most inappropriate for inclusion in an inclusive classroom." Assume that the parent's answer is a child with ADHD, then he/she would provide further clarification for this answer. The above explanations are intended to provide a deeper understanding of parents' attitudes and feelings about the inclusion of SEN children in inclusive classrooms. Other questions focused on parents' concerns and expectations about practices of IE:

- 1) What do you think is the biggest difficulty in implementing inclusive education locally?
- 2) What positive efforts do you think parents should make to implement inclusive education?
- 3) What support would you like to receive in order to cooperate with the school in implementing inclusive education?

During the interviews, parents shared their opinions in a comfortable way based on their personal experiences. For this descriptive data collection, recordings and notebooks helped researchers transcribe the data in its entirety (Esan & Bayaj idda, 2021). Moreover, the flexibility and freedom in the conversation process helped the researchers to obtain real and reliable answers from the detailed descriptions of the interviewees.

### 2.3.2 Semi-structured interview for teachers

The Interviews are combined with questionnaires. The aim is to obtain key information about the research questions through in-depth interviews. As a qualitative component, the semi-structured interview implies a follow-up work of the quantitative phase (McKim, 2017). Thus, this section supplements the survey data with more in-depth and detailed qualitative data.

At the end of the questionnaire, teachers who were willing for the next interview were scheduled for face-to-face interviews in their free time. To ensure the effectiveness of the interview, the time was controlled to 15-30 minutes. The specific interview questions are listed below:

- 1) How do you get along with the SEN students you have met? What difficulties and challenges have you encountered in the process?
- 2) What is the most unacceptable type of SEN student for you? What impact might he/she have on the mainstream classroom?
- 3) Do you think you are competent enough to manage inclusive classrooms? As a teacher, what are your concerns about implementing inclusive education?
- 4) How do you expect the education sector or school to support you?

These questions presented in this follow-up survey were developed to complement the questionnaire section. The teachers shared their feelings and perceptions about inclusive education with the researchers by recounting their personal experiences. At the same time, the researcher obtained detailed and realistic answers through the teachers' specific elaboration of the questions. Semi-structured interviews also have disadvantages, for instance, the diversity and richness of data pose a challenge for analysis.

## 3. Data Analysis

There are differences in the methods used for quantitative and qualitative analysis. According to Gallagher (2009), quantitative analysis is mainly summary statistics (for example, percentages and frequencies), significance tests, inferential statistics, and graphs. Qualitative analysis usually uses thematic analysis, content analysis, conversational analysis, and narrative analysis. Since the mixed method was used in this study, both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were used in this phase.

### 3.1 Questionnaire

The completed questionnaires were coded using SPSS software. Because SPSS not only quickly codes the relevant variables, but also quickly analyzes the results that researchers expect (Bryman, 2016). For the items answered as "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" and "strongly disagree", the items on the four-point Likert scale were scored 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The same scale was used to answer the always, often, sometimes, and never items. The age ranges of the respondents were coded 1 to 4, starting from the lowest to the highest age range. Dichotomous items were coded 1 and 2. For instance, questions that demanded "male" or "female" and "yes" or "no" were coded as 1 and 2, respectively.

According to Gallagher (2009), the methodologies of quantitative analysis are well-established, owing to significant advancements in the field of statistics. In contrast, qualitative analysis remains a subject of debate, as each method can be implemented in various ways.

### 3.2 Focus group and semi-structured interview

The focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews generated a large amount of data that researchers need to analyze meaningfully and give results (Greig et al., 2013, p. 85). One of the most common methods of qualitative data analysis is thematic analysis, which is also the most frequently used method in qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, it is appropriate to use thematic analysis for focus groups and interviews. Themes may come from the following aspects: 1) The analyst uses his/her data to identify a category; 2) Related to the research question; 3) Build on code in transcripts or field records (Bryman, 2016). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is divided into 6 steps which have been shown and expressed in the following Table 2.

In summary, data generated from focus groups and semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis with the consent of the participants.

**Table 2. Phases of the thematic analysis**

Familiar with the data	Transcribe data and write down initial ideas through repeated readings.
Generating the initial codes	Coding the characteristics of the data in a systematic way.
	Organizing the data related to the code.
Searching for themes	Organize the code into potential themes and collect all data related to them.
Reviewing themes	Check if the themes are relevant to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, generating a "map" of themes for analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Analyze the story told by each theme and refine the details of each theme.
Preparation of the report	Select vivid and interesting summary examples for the final analysis.
	Integrate analytical background with research questions and literature to prepare scholarly reports.

Note. Adapted from Greig (2013, p. 86), which is cited in Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87).

## 4. Sampling Strategy and Time

Nanchong is a prefecture-level city in Sichuan Province, which is located in the northeastern part of the Sichuan Basin in China. Nanchong has 3 districts, 5 counties, and 1 county-level city under its jurisdiction. By the end of 2019, there were 271 primary schools in Nanchong, and there were 356,700 students in school (Nanchong Municipal Government, 2020). Moreover, as an important city in the development of the "Belt and Road" strategy (Ministry of Commerce, 2019), Nanchong is a suitable research site to provide representative data. The research sample was obtained through an open recruitment process at the school. Specifically, posting a poster on the school's bulletin board about the "Inclusive Education Program" for the purpose of recruiting volunteers. Researchers must communicate with school directors in advance to obtain the opportunity to recruit volunteers at their schools and conduct open recruitment at six primary schools in Nanchong. It is worth mentioning that all six selected primary schools have a history of accommodating SEN students. Thus, it is important for researchers to know the background of these schools.

### 4.1 Questionnaire

The ideal sample to participate in the online questionnaire was 300 students, 120 teachers, and 60 parents. As suggested by Cohen (2004), the sample size could be increased to half of the required size because some questionnaires could not be responded to. The size of the sample is very noteworthy because the larger the sample, the more representative it is (Bryman, 2016, p. 183). However, decisions about sample size are influenced by time and cost considerations. Thus, the number of questionnaires that can be sent should be maximized as time and resources allow (Bryman, 2016, p. 183). It is also important to note that all students recruited should be from grades 4-6 (ages 10-12). Because they have some reading comprehension and expression skills at this stage, they are able to complete answers with guidance or independently (Jiang & Wang, 2013, p. 11).

### 4.2 Focus group and semi-structured interview

According to Bryman (2016), when conducting a mixed-methods survey involving quantitative and qualitative research, the results of the survey can be used as a basis for selecting a purposive sample (p. 598). Therefore, purposive sampling was used in the group discussion and semi-structured interview phases. For example, participants were asked at the end of the questionnaire whether they would like to participate in further group discussions and interviews to explore questions about inclusive education in more depth.

#### 4.2.1 Focus group

The focus groups were scheduled on weekends so as not to delay the children's studies. Before that, the researcher contacted the children through their contact information left in the questionnaire and informed them of the exact time and

address of the activity. Since the children were minors, the researchers considered the issue of gatekeepers. Make sure their guardians are agreeable and supportive before the children participate in focus groups. The study was set up with four focus groups, each with six participants.

#### 4.2.2 Semi-structured interview

During this phase, the researcher purposefully selected 20 parents as well as 30 teachers to conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews in order to provide more information and interpretation of the research questions. It is worth mentioning that the researcher should establish a good relationship with the participants during the interview process so that the authenticity and reliability of the interview can be supported (Bryman, 2016).

### 5. Conclusion

On a broader level, this paper is motivated by the observation that inclusive education (IE) is a complex and idealized process. Although it has spread and gained some momentum around the world, decades of global practice have not led to the expected results due to local economic, cultural circumstances, and political factors (Ni & Li, 2019, p. 124). Especially in some economically and educationally underdeveloped areas, people still lack a deep understanding of IE, and IE has not yet been generally accepted. In such a practical situation, some people consider it difficult to implement IE in mainstream primary schools in remote areas of China. Hence, in order to explore inclusive education in elementary schools in remote areas of China, I have focused on the following three research questions:

- 1) To what extent is it effective to implement IE in remote areas of China?
- 2) Can primary schools in remote areas of China accept all students with special educational needs from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds?
- 3) What are the specific problems and pressures faced by primary schools for implementing IE in remote cities in China?

I have discussed and studied these 3 issues from the perspective of parents, teachers, and students respectively.

In this project, I chose a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct my research, which contributed to the integrity of my investigation. The study was conducted in Nanchong City, Sichuan Province, China, and participants were openly recruited in six primary schools with a history of accommodating SEN students to obtain a survey sample. The study data was obtained through online questionnaires, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. Among them, the ideal sample for the questionnaire was 300 students, 120 teachers, and 60 parents. In addition, the samples for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were obtained through purposive sampling in the questionnaire phase. Questions in questionnaires, group discussions, and semi-structured interviews were designed to investigate participants' perceptions of IE, attitudes towards different types of SEN students, concerns and expectations about the implementation of IE. The SPSS system, which is commonly used for quantitative analysis, and thematic analysis, which is most common for qualitative data analysis, are employed in the data analysis phase.

To make this research project more realistic, I designed a complete schedule and compiled the materials and costs needed for the study. Furthermore, since the participants in this project involve different groups, I have elaborated on the ethical issues that each group needs to be aware of during their participation to ensure that my research is ethical.

The significance of this research proposal is that its results reflect the success rate of implementing IE in remote areas of China. The results of the project also support the implementation of policies by local governments and the education sectors. In China, although a few developed cities have explored and practiced IE, in the backward western region, except for the traditional field of special education, inclusive education is not generally understood and recognized, and there are only a few studies on inclusive education. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of IE and the expansion of thinking about the issue of educational equity in both breadth and depth is a topic of great practical significance in contemporary Chinese education (Ni & Li, 2019, p. 121).

Obviously, the research proposal also has some shortcomings. For instance, the sample of participants drawn from the six schools selected within Nanchong is not representative of the attitudes of all others. Limited research resources and research funding affect the quality of research.

In conclusion, as the largest developing country, promoting inclusive education is still one of the most fundamental tasks of the country (Zhou, 2008). In order to advance the realistic path of inclusive education in various cities and regions of China, it is not enough to focus on the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students. Changes in education policy, educator quality, and educational approach will provide a stronger foundation for IE (Ni & Li, 2019). Thus, future research, involving the above three directions will be of great significance to the research on inclusive education in China.

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