

Multiple Dilemmas in the Placement of Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Education: A Grounded Theory Study Based on Online Public Comments

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Abstract: Inclusive education constitutes a vital manifestation of educational equity, yet the placement of children with special needs in mainstream schools remains fraught with challenges. Employing grounded theory, this study analyzes 4,136 online public comments related to an incident at a primary school in Wuhan and constructs a multiple-dilemma model encompassing the absence of policy and systemic support at the macro level, stakeholder pressure and resource scarcity at the meso and micro levels, cognitive and attitudinal conflicts at the interactional level, and placement execution barriers at the outcome level. The findings indicate that capacity building for inclusive education requires strengthened top-level design, multi-tiered social support networks, improved professional support channels, and an inclusive campus culture, thereby facilitating the transition from formal placement to substantive integration.

1. Introduction

Educational equity represents a fundamental right of modern citizens. All students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, region, health condition, or family background, are entitled to equal educational opportunities free from exclusion or discrimination [1]. Inclusive education, as a critical pathway toward educational equity, endeavors to construct inclusive and supportive learning communities for all students, including children with special educational needs. In recent years, the Chinese government has continuously intensified policy support for special and inclusive education. The 14th Five-Year Special Education Development and Improvement Action Plan explicitly advocates advancing inclusive development, emphasizing the priority of placing children with disabilities in regular schools and striving to build a high-quality special education system [2]. Driven by this policy momentum, the national compulsory education enrollment rate for children with disabilities has stabilized above 95 percent, and the number of special-needs children attending regular schools continues to expand. Nevertheless, as inclusive education transitions from the universal-access phase of ensuring enrollment to the quality-improvement phase of ensuring effective learning, deep-seated contradictions in practice have become increasingly prominent.

Behind the vigorous policy advocacy, grassroots implementation still lacks an effective multi-

stakeholder support system. The placement of children with special needs constitutes a complex social issue involving the intertwined interests of students, parents, teachers, schools, and communities. Given this, the present study draws on online public comments related to the Wuhan Primary School Incident as empirical material and employs grounded theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the current inclusion dilemmas facing children with special needs in China. The study aims to elucidate a multi-factorially constituted support dilemma and to provide theoretical references and practical recommendations for promoting the transition from formal placement to substantive integration, thereby facilitating the high-quality development of inclusive education.

2. Research Methods and Design

2.1 Research Method

Grounded theory, proposed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, is a bottom-up qualitative methodology for constructing substantive theory from empirical data through three sequential stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding [2]. Its adoption is justified on three grounds. First, the fit with the research problem: the inclusion dilemma is a complex social reality, and grounded theory's emphasis on generating theory from raw data enables the construction of an interpretive framework rooted in the Chinese local context. Second, the uniqueness of the data: social media comments are characterized by high spontaneity and substantial volume, requiring systematic analytical procedures for transparent processing. Third, the depth of theoretical construction: grounded theory emphasizes constant comparison until theoretical saturation, ensuring the resulting model adequately reflects the multi-factorial support network dilemma.

2.2 Research Design

This study utilizes online comment data from Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) for three reasons. First, user comments represent spontaneous expressions rather than researcher-guided responses, largely avoiding interference such as the Hawthorne effect. Second, the platform boasts a diverse community including parents, frontline teachers, and education-focused publics, offering multifaceted perspectives. Third, the interactive comment format provides a direct dialogue arena for stakeholders with differing positions, furnishing rich data on the fracture points of the social support network [3].

Centering on the Wuhan Primary School Incident of September 2025, searches were conducted using keywords including Wuhan primary school, inclusive education, children with special needs, and related derivatives. Posts published within one week with over 300 comments each were selected, yielding five posts as data samples. The Octoparse tool was used to compliantly scrape all public comments. After cleaning, including removal of duplicates, emojis, and insubstantial statements as well as correction of typographical errors, 4,136 valid coded entries were obtained, with 20 percent reserved for theoretical saturation testing.

3. Research Findings

Using NVivo 20, the online comment data were subjected to step-by-step coding analysis, with comments numbered a1 through a4136.

3.1 Open Coding

Open coding requires examining textual material word by word, extracting initial codes, and

conducting cluster analysis to establish as many codes as possible. Through continuous comparison and analysis, the relationships among codes are gradually clarified and initial categories are obtained [4]. This study ultimately extracted 67 initial concepts, which were grouped into 12 initial categories (see Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Open Coding Results and Category Extraction

Initial Category	Initial Concepts
Teacher Occupational Stress	Excessive workload; emotional exhaustion; lack of training; burnout
Parental Cognitive Resistance	Denial of problems; stigma; avoidance; refusal of intervention
School Resource Limitations	Insufficient staff; oversized classes; lack of resources; funding shortages
Difficulty in Special School Admission	Limited quotas; high thresholds; disability certificate; long waits
Policy Implementation Disconnect	Empty rhetoric; lack of measures; weak enforcement; uneven allocation
Impairment of Regular Students' Rights	Disrupted learning; physical harm; classroom disturbance
Multi-stakeholder Conflicts	Failed communication; responsibility shifting; escalating conflicts
Shadow Teacher Dilemma	Prohibitive costs; staff shortage; lack of policy support; uneven outcomes
Children's Behavioral Problems	Aggression; hyperactivity; emotional outbursts; social deficits
Absence of Social Forces	Low inclusiveness; scarce resources; public pressure; systemic neglect
Educational Equity Controversy	Special vs. regular rights; moral coercion; conflicting definitions
Emotional and Moral Dilemma	Teacher guilt; parental helplessness; moral pressure; value struggles

3.2 Axial Coding

Axial coding involves analyzing and comparing the categories formed during open coding to establish organic connections among various parts of the data [5]. The 12 initial categories were recombined according to their inherent connections into 4 overarching main categories (see Table 2).

Table 2: Main Categories and Their Connotations

Main Category	Initial Category
Structural Resource Dilemma	Teacher Occupational Stress
Structural Resource Dilemma	School Resource Limitations
Structural Resource Dilemma	Shadow Teacher Dilemma
Institutional Exclusion Dilemma	Difficulty in Special School Admission
Institutional Exclusion Dilemma	Children's Behavioral Problems
Institutional Exclusion Dilemma	Educational Equity Controversy
Intersubjective Rights Dilemma	Impairment of Regular Students' Rights
Intersubjective Rights Dilemma	Multi-stakeholder Conflicts
Intersubjective Rights Dilemma	Emotional and Moral Dilemma
Cognitive and Responsibility Dilemma	Parental Cognitive Resistance
Cognitive and Responsibility Dilemma	Policy Implementation Disconnect
Cognitive and Responsibility Dilemma	Absence of Social Forces

3.3 Selective Coding

Selective coding represents the stage of further refining and integrating core categories on the basis of open and axial coding, organically connecting fragmented concepts and constructing a theoretical model through logical relationship analysis [6]. Through continuous comparison and theoretical abstraction of the four main categories and their interrelationships, this study extracted the core category: systemic inclusion dilemmas under multi-stakeholder responsibility dynamics. Its connotation is that the current educational placement of children with special needs in China is not merely a technical proposition but a systemic crisis interwoven by four dimensions: resource allocation, institutional design, rights conflicts, and responsibility cognition. The absence of policy and systemic support at the macro level leads to stakeholder pressure and resource scarcity at the meso and micro levels; this triggers cognitive and attitudinal conflicts at the interactional level; such conflicts exacerbate placement execution barriers at the outcome level; and these barriers in turn reinforce the absence of policy and systemic support. Through multi-stakeholder responsibility dynamics, resources are consumed and systemic failure forms a vicious cycle.

3.4 Saturation Test

Data reach saturation when the collection of new data no longer generates new concepts, categorical relationships, or theoretical insights. Applying the same coding procedure to the reserved 20 percent of comments revealed no new concepts or categories, confirming that the systemic model of inclusive education capacity explored in this study has reached theoretical saturation and possesses considerable explanatory power.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Through step-by-step coding and continuous comparison, this study extracted four main categories subsumed under the core category of inclusion dilemmas under multi-stakeholder responsibility conflicts. The findings indicate that the current practical dilemmas of inclusive education in China have transcended the mere technical dimension and are deeply embedded in a complex systemic crisis interwoven with resource shortages, institutional gaps, interest conflicts, and responsibility evasion. Various stakeholders, driven by the instinct to safeguard their own interests, construct a strategic interaction network of mutual constraint and responsibility shifting. The following analyzes the generative logic of this systemic dilemma from four dimensions.

4.1 Structural Resource Dilemma

Resource allocation constitutes the material foundation sustaining inclusive education. The study finds that the advancement of inclusive education is accompanied by a severe gap in resource supply, and the scarcity of macro-level support is transmitted layer by layer along the educational system, ultimately evolving into structural constraints on micro-level stakeholders and special-needs families. School resource limitations constitute a foundational factor: regular schools commonly face shortages of special education resources, inadequate hardware environments such as resource rooms and barrier-free facilities, and critically, the absence of professional support teams comprising resource teachers, psychological counselors, and rehabilitation therapists. As one frontline teacher remarked, regular school teachers simply lack the energy and professional training to care for children with special needs. When admitting such children, regular schools essentially operate without a professional support system, causing inclusive education policies to be reduced to mere physical spatial placement.

When macro-level supportive resources are chronically absent, the conflict is transformed into teachers' occupational pressure. As grassroots implementers, regular school teachers must simultaneously address routine classroom management and academic assessment while confronting the highly heterogeneous needs of children with special needs. One teacher described being on the verge of collapse after one week, having to monitor one special child meticulously while caring for sixty others. Lacking special education training, teachers face the dual challenge of professional competence and role overload, leading to occupational burnout and self-doubt. To maintain classroom functioning, teachers often adopt defensive strategies, implicitly sidelining the academic and developmental needs of special-needs children and acquiescing in their marginalization. The inadequacy of public support further prompts families to seek market-based shadow teacher services, marking the transfer of responsibility from state provision to family self-reliance. High costs and uneven quality exclude economically limited families, undermining equity and exacerbating resource allocation imbalances.

4.2 Institutional Exclusion Dilemma

The rigidity of the inclusive education placement system blocks effective pathways for children with special needs to access appropriate support. The current special education system features an insurmountable institutional divide between regular and special schools, and the absence of a continuous placement mechanism has given rise to intense exclusionary reactions. The starting point lies in the special school admission mechanism, which exhibits a highly medicalized diagnostic orientation, treating the possession of a disability certificate and severe impairment as rigid admission criteria. This one-size-fits-all threshold disregards the continuity and dynamic nature of children's development, forcibly excluding children with mild to moderate developmental disorders from professional support. As one parent confessed, special education schools only accept children with severe autism or intellectual disability; ADHD and IQ above 80 do not qualify. These children face high barriers to special schools and cannot remain in regular schools due to resource scarcity, ultimately abandoned by both systems simultaneously.

When these children are unilaterally pushed into regular classrooms lacking inclusive design, high-frequency behavioral dysregulation follows. Children's disruptive behavior is not merely individual pathology but a stress response when individual traits conflict with environmental demands. The highly structured timetables and disciplinary norms emphasizing quietness and obedience constitute persistent environmental oppression for children with sensory abnormalities or executive function deficits. After prolonged sensory overload and academic frustration, aggression, hyperactivity, and emotional outbursts essentially represent maladjustment to the regular school environment. However, within ecosystems lacking positive behavior support, these behaviors are often directly characterized as disciplinary violations or moral deficiencies, becoming the fuse that ignites classroom conflicts. Such dysregulation evolves into controversies over educational equity: the inclusive rights of special groups collide with the normal learning rights of regular groups within confined, resource-constrained spaces. As one regular parent asked rhetorically, my daughter was hit and the teacher said that child has special needs, so does my child deserve to be hit? Inclusive education, originally a straightforward policy, is transformed into a hotspot of rights contention among different social groups.

4.3 Intersubjective Rights Dilemma

Constrained by insufficient macro-level resource supply and meso-level institutional exclusion, the educational collaboration mechanism within the micro-level classroom tends to disintegrate, with stakeholders confronting one another and giving rise to a profound intersubjective rights

dilemma. The point of conflict lies in the objective impairment of regular students' development rights. Under China's highly competitive academic evaluation system, classroom time and teaching order are regarded as scarce resources affecting children's development prospects. The potentially uncontrolled behavior, occasional aggression, or excessive consumption of teacher attention by special-needs children objectively affects regular students' focus and academic progress, and may threaten their safety and mental health. One parent noted that his son was hit and left with a scar. When impairment becomes reality, regular children and parents inevitably resist the existing placement model.

In the absence of trust and professional coordination, all parties prioritize self-defense and interest maximization. Regular parents demand the removal of special-needs children through collective petitions and pressure on educational authorities; one comment described a class collectively boycotting after three years of endurance. Special-needs parents assert rights based on the Compulsory Education Law and may conceal their children's conditions or excessively intervene. School administrators and teachers, to avoid accountability and public opinion risks, often obfuscate responsibilities and appease both sides. The home-school relationships that should be based on educational consensus gradually disintegrate, with all parties shifting responsibility and consuming one another. Such rights disputes ultimately create emotional and ethical dilemmas: teachers torn between educational equity ideals and practical pressures, special-needs parents plunged into helplessness and self-blame, and even regular parents experiencing moral anxiety behind their exclusionary behavior. These dilemmas constitute the most concealed and destructive internal crises in advancing inclusive education.

4.4 Cognitive and Responsibility Dilemma

The deep-seated reason these multiple dilemmas remain chronically entrenched lies in cognitive deviations and evasion of responsibility among stakeholders at all levels. The emptiness of macro-level governance and the defensive resistance of micro-level families mutually reinforce one another, closing off viable pathways to resolution. At the macro and meso levels, policy implementation disconnect reveals institutional formalism. Top-down inclusive education policies construct highly inclusive scenarios textually, yet at key links touching upon core interests, such as operational details, staffing standards, and special fund transfers, they remain in institutional vacuum. Local departments and schools often adopt symbolic implementation, satisfying paper-based indicators while stagnating in substantive resource investment. As one teacher pointed out, children with special needs are forcibly placed in large classes without support, euphemistically called inclusive education, while only the leaders' year-end report shows results. Macro directives lacking resource guarantees cause intervention responsibility to be shifted downward layer by layer, ultimately becoming a pressure that grassroots schools and teachers cannot bear.

The operation of inclusive education depends on cross-sector ecosystem collaboration, yet the external support system comprising public health intervention, disability social work, and community inclusion advocacy exhibits collective absence, leaving special groups chronically trapped in implicit discrimination and families unable to obtain emotional support or professional resources. Under this fracture, parental cognitive resistance evolves into a deformed defensive mechanism. Based on stigma and fear of social labeling, some parents subconsciously construct strong cognitive defenses, refusing to acknowledge their children's developmental delays and avoiding medical assessment. One teacher lamented that parents' denial makes intervention extremely difficult. Self-deception and concealment, on the surface resistance to disability identity, essentially constitute shifting of caregiving responsibilities. The absence of families during critical intervention periods leads to failed early intervention; when unidentified children enter regular

schools, their latent behavioral problems erupt abruptly, pushing the regular education system to collapse. The idling of macro policies and concealment of family responsibilities thus form a closed loop, blocking the last pathway for children with special needs to obtain substantive support.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The current practice of inclusive education in regular schools in China confronts threefold tensions: structural misalignment of macro-level resource allocation, mechanistic fracture of meso-level institutional coordination, and value conflict of micro-level stakeholder interests. Resolving this systemic dilemma requires grounding efforts in modern educational governance and establishing a multi-centered, three-dimensional inclusive education ecosystem. Strengthening institutional guarantees and collaborative education is essential for bridging the gap between policy advocacy and practical implementation. Educational administrative supervision systems should incorporate the effectiveness of regional inclusive education, resource room operation, and special fund utilization into core indicators of local government and school principal assessments, increasing their weight through normalized supervision and accountability. Simultaneously, deepening medical-educational collaboration at the national level, exploring basic neurodevelopmental and mental health screening as an organic component of educational services at preschool and enrollment stages, and proactively engaging community health centers and minor protection organizations for cases involving guardian cognitive deviations can help ensure early intervention. Furthermore, civil affairs, disability federations, and health commissions should strengthen cross-departmental collaboration to develop social organizations serving special-needs populations and advance neurodiversity popularization and anti-discrimination advocacy across society.

Promoting the development of special education public services addresses the structural contradiction between standardized large-scale education and the heterogeneous individualized needs of children with special needs. Educational and financial departments should establish a dynamic funding allocation model based on support level and needs rather than disability certificate possession, relying on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and assessment reports to grade support intensity and allocate dedicated funds to regular schools, prioritizing compensation for teachers' increased workload and procurement of assistive technologies. The high cost of the shadow teacher market, which essentially transfers public responsibilities to families, necessitates the acceleration of relevant personnel institutionalization, the establishment of national vocational qualification frameworks, and the procurement of certified assistant services from qualified social work agencies. Additionally, regional special education resource centers with professional staff should be established to regularly enter regular schools for collaborative lesson planning and IEP supervision, providing timely cross-disciplinary case management and positive behavior support during educational crises.

Clarifying the rights and responsibilities of stakeholders is fundamental to rebuilding trust and collaboration. Educational departments should formulate legally effective regulations for learning in regular classes, clearly defining high-risk behavioral characteristics and specifying that schools may initiate mandatory isolation, require guardian collaboration, or lawfully suspend placement during crises, thus providing managers with clear enforcement basis and alleviating regular groups' anxiety over unknown risks. Multi-party IEP negotiation mechanisms should be institutionalized, requiring school administrators, special education teachers, regular homeroom teachers, and special-needs parents to jointly participate in IEP meetings with social workers as coordinators when necessary, establishing in written form the limits of school support, parental intervention requirements, and emergency response protocols. Concurrently, normalized emotional and psychological support

networks should be established for teachers involved in inclusive education, providing case review and counseling to help clarify role boundaries and enhance psychological resilience and professional efficacy.

Establishing a continuous placement system addresses the rigidity that serves as a key institutional inducement for inclusion dilemmas. Educational placement should follow child development logic rather than being a one-time decision; multidisciplinary placement evaluation committees should be established to adopt function- and needs-oriented comprehensive assessment, breaking down institutional barriers between regular schools, special schools, resource rooms, and home-based intervention, and constructing two-way circulation mechanisms allowing students who fail to adapt to transition to special schools for phased rehabilitation and return gradually when ready. School management should shift from punishment-oriented approaches to school-wide positive behavior support, introducing multi-tiered systems including environmental noise reduction and emotional regulation spaces at the primary prevention level, and functional behavioral assessments with antecedent control for high-frequency problem behaviors at higher tiers. Finally, evaluation reform should institutionally sever the association between sole academic performance and teacher evaluation, exclude special students' performance from class average statistics and teacher performance assessments, and establish an evaluation system centered on IEP goal attainment and value-added development in cognition, emotion, and social adaptation, thereby promoting educational evaluation toward substantive equity.

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