

# Challenges and Pathways for Enhancing Early Childhood Educators' Inclusive Education Competencies from an Identity Theory Perspective

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**Abstract:** Early childhood educators play a crucial role as key practitioners of inclusive education. Whether early childhood educators possess clear self-identity, role identity, group identity, and cultural identity regarding inclusive education literacy directly impacts the quality of preschool inclusive education. Based on identity theory, this study identifies several challenges: low self-identity due to insufficient professional knowledge, weak role identity awareness stemming from lacking inclusive skills, group identity struggles arising from scarce resource utilization, and cultural identity crises fueled by high-pressure work environments. Building upon identity theory, this study proposes breakthrough strategies: enriching professional knowledge to enhance self-identity; strengthening practical experience to foster role identity; deepening resource integration to promote group identity; and creating a harmonious atmosphere to support cultural identity. These approaches aim to elevate the overall quality of the preschool inclusive education workforce, thereby advancing high-quality education that supports children's healthy development.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Early Childhood Education; Teacher Role; Inclusive Education Competency; Identity Formation.

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## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of building an education powerhouse, China's demand for educational equity and an inclusive society has become an indispensable component in the pursuit of high-quality educational development. Inclusive preschool education, by providing early childhood education without discrimination to all children, not only concerns the well-being of children with special needs but also serves as a crucial benchmark for measuring societal progress and achieving equality of opportunity. Teachers must possess clear self-awareness and role consciousness to understand the teacher's being. They also bear the mission of advancing knowledge, upholding ethics, sustaining learning motivation, and enhancing professional competence—addressing the question of how to be a professional educator. [1] In June 1994, the concept of inclusive education was introduced at the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain. This conference further propelled educational system reforms worldwide, ensuring all children—including those with special educational needs—gain equal educational opportunities within mainstream educational settings. In recent years, driven by advocates like Deng Meng, inclusive education has gradually entered the public consciousness in China. At a conference titled “Reflections on the Local Development Experience of Inclusive Education in China,” Deng Meng emphasized that inclusive education should focus on diverse individuals, balanced developmental goals, a multi-tiered support system, and collaborative teamwork and professional support involving multiple stakeholders. [2] China's newly enacted Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities in 2017 also established the policy principle of “prioritizing the development of inclusive education.” In 2022, the Action Plan for Enhancing Special Education Development during the 14th Five-Year Plan period emphasized that fostering value recognition and strengthening teacher training are the

foundation and key to accelerating the development of inclusive preschool education. The document “Accelerating the Development of Inclusive Preschool Education: Ensuring Every Child Accesses Equitable and Quality Education” states that “the key to developing high-quality inclusive preschool education lies in the teachers.” The introduction of national policies is conducive to promoting the realization of true educational equity and helping special groups enjoy equitable and quality education. Ensuring every child receives education in a mainstream setting not only embodies educational equity but also supports shared growth for both typically developing and special needs children. This deserves attention from the education sector and necessitates cultivating high-quality, versatile teachers to support the development of all young learners. Implementing preschool inclusive education should begin in early childhood, minimizing the negative impact of physical or mental disabilities on young children and enhancing societal acceptance of special needs groups. Simultaneously, as primary practitioners of inclusive education, the competence of preschool inclusive educators directly impacts the physical and mental well-being of both typically developing and special needs children. Furthermore, their professional identity profoundly influences their reflection on their role. How they navigate challenges to adapt and transform their roles within practical teaching contexts remains a significant consideration.

## 2. Identity Theory and Its Implications for Enhancing Inclusive Competencies Among Early Childhood Educators

### 2.1. Identity Theory

Identity theory synthesizes multiple disciplines including philosophy, sociology, and psychology, forming a comprehensive theoretical paradigm aimed at addressing the

fundamental questions of “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” It transcends singular disciplinary perspectives, offering a holistic analytical framework for understanding the complex interplay between individuals and society—from the micro level of individual psychology to the macro level of social structures. This theory typically categorizes identity into four dimensions: self-identity, role identity, group identity, and cultural identity. Through continuous interaction, these dimensions collectively shape a dynamic, fluid concept of the “self.”

First, self-identity. Self-identity primarily addresses the question “Who am I?” by focusing on an in-depth internal analysis of one's personal characteristics, professional competencies, and self-beliefs. Through continuous introspection, individuals strengthen their self-awareness and gain a clear understanding of “Who I am.” While every person possesses multiple identities, for educators, a lack of clarity regarding their professional identity—such as insufficient patience, compassion, or conviction toward their teaching vocation—can become a significant obstacle to their career development.

Second, role identity. Role identity clarifies “my responsibilities.” It is the process of internalizing and practicing the duties, norms, and expectations associated with the teacher role, built upon a foundation of self-identity. What should be the clear, inherent responsibilities in the teaching profession? When frontline teachers explicitly identify themselves as “inclusive education teachers,” this becomes the core of their identity. They proactively enhance their adaptability, persistently study inclusive education knowledge, learn to appropriately adjust curricula, implement differentiated instruction, and embrace all children. This process is not merely about skill enhancement; it represents a deep understanding and affirmation of the role's essence. It is the key to transforming external role requirements into an internal professional mission.

Third, group identity. Group identity involves recognizing “who we are.” When individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a group and experience the emotional bonds and values associated with that membership, group identity emerges. This sense of belonging stems from shared goals, behavioral norms, and a collective understanding of the group's destiny. A teacher's strong identification as an “inclusive education teacher” motivates her to actively collaborate with colleagues, share resources, and jointly shoulder pressures. This fosters a sense of belonging, support, and professional pride. Through this process, she internalizes inclusive education expertise and competencies, thereby strengthening the collective capacity to address challenges.

Fourth, cultural identity. Cultural identity requires a clear understanding of “our” concepts and values. It signifies recognition and acceptance of the shared concepts, values, symbols, and traditions of a particular group or community. For inclusive preschool educators, this is not merely a job but an affirmation and practice of building an inclusive society. It advocates respecting differences, pursuing equity, and championing the values of diversity and coexistence. This cultural identity provides the ultimate meaning and spiritual motivation for teachers' professional conduct and group belonging. It is the foundation for ensuring every child receives equitable, high-quality education and the core force that inspires educators to overcome specific challenges and uphold their educational ideals.

In summary, identity theory outlines a system of

recognition that progresses from the uniqueness of the “I” (self-identity) to the responsibilities of the “I” (role identity), and further to the belonging of the “we” (group identity) and the ideals and values of the “we” (cultural identity). Understanding this system is crucial for deeply analyzing the intrinsic motivations and practical challenges of early childhood educators' inclusive education competencies, thereby enabling the development of effective support systems.

## **2.2. The Value Implications of Early Childhood Educators' Identity for Enhancing Inclusive Competence**

The identity formation of early childhood educators is a continuous process of self-affirmation and construction, reflecting their recognition and reflection on possessing inclusive education competencies. When educators struggle to define their value and direction, their self-positioning analysis becomes ambiguous, leading to challenges and crises in identity formation. This not only causes confusion about professional responsibilities and career uncertainty but also undermines educational quality. [3] This ambiguity not only leads to confusion about job responsibilities and professional uncertainty but also contributes to declining educational quality. Therefore, analyzing early childhood educators' identity holds significant value for enhancing their overall inclusive education competencies.

First, enhancing early childhood educators' inclusive competencies is grounded in their self-identity. Only by acknowledging their professional identity while deeply analyzing their strengths and weaknesses can teachers build personal confidence, enabling them to calmly address challenging behaviors exhibited by children with special needs. Second, the improvement of inclusive competencies is driven by role identity. By establishing an identity as an inclusive educator characterized by “acceptance, respect, and nurturing love,” teachers can consciously cultivate a professional attitude, develop a strong sense of commitment to their vocation, and dedicate themselves to deepening their expertise. This enhances their soft skills, enabling them to provide wholehearted support when challenging behaviors arise in the classroom, thereby facilitating positive change in children. Third, the enhancement of inclusive competence is supported by group identity. Identifying with the “inclusive educator” community motivates teachers to proactively learn inclusive skills, participate in relevant training, implement the principle of equal education for all children under educational equity, enhance their competitive edge, and continuously accumulate inclusive education experience in practice, contributing to equitable education for every child. Fourth, the enhancement of inclusive competence among early childhood educators hinges on cultural identity. By enhancing their skills in mainstreaming children with and without special needs, teachers strengthen their cultural identity, fostering a professional mindset as “multi-skilled mainstreaming educators.” This enables them to effectively support children with special needs in truly integrating into society.

### **3. The Practical Challenges of Enhancing Early Childhood Educators' Inclusive Education Competencies Under Identity Theory**

Identity theory emphasizes outward expansion from self-identity, centering on self-identity recognition. This shift in understanding from “I” to ‘we’ enables educators to gain a more precise grasp of “who I am” and “who we are.” It strengthens reflective awareness, enhances reflective capabilities, and deepens the conviction to elevate inclusive education literacy. In practice, early childhood educators still face challenges in inclusive education literacy, such as insufficient professional knowledge, lack of inclusive skills, limited resource utilization, and high work pressure. This analysis primarily examines these challenges through the lens of identity theory.

#### **3.1. Low self-identity due to insufficient professional knowledge**

Preschool inclusive educators should possess competencies in managing complex situations, creating supportive environments, adapting curricula and implementing differentiated instruction, as well as communicating and collaborating effectively. Their professional knowledge should encompass dual expertise in both special education and general education, reflecting an interdisciplinary approach. During the initial career phase, most educational institutions prioritize professional support, identity development, job satisfaction, and stress management for novice teachers, emphasizing that the inclusive education attitudes of new kindergarten teachers critically influence their inclusive educational practices. [4] Regarding in-service training, most teacher training programs focus on theoretical knowledge delivery and the dissemination of inclusive education concepts. Instruction primarily takes the form of large-classroom lectures, with limited practical, hands-on courses. As a result, teachers gain little from these sessions. [5] Therefore, this also explains why early childhood educators lack sufficient knowledge of inclusive education. An educator's pursuit of self-identity depends not only on external environments but also on their own state of acceptance. When an individual's professional knowledge is inadequate, they often lose confidence during practice, which in turn affects the learning outcomes of their students. This can lead to a sense of imbalance in personal meaning, identity, and belonging, making it difficult to answer the question “Who am I?” A survey by Hong Xiumin et al. revealed that only 0.2% of kindergarten principals and teachers possess a background in special education. Over 60% (64.3%) of principals and teachers reported that their institutions had never organized professional training in inclusive education for their staff. Cui Xiali and colleagues conducted a survey on the inclusive competencies of preschool teachers and found that kindergarten teachers scored lowest in inclusive education knowledge. 63.59% of kindergarten teachers had not received relevant in-service training, and 46.22% had not studied inclusive education knowledge during their pre-service training. [6] The lack of professional knowledge often leaves teachers feeling inadequate in their daily work, frequently encountering situations where they are unsure how to handle special needs children in their classrooms or lack

effective strategies.

#### **3.2. Weak Sense of Role Identity Due to Lack of Integration Skills**

Early childhood educators with 3-5 years of experience can identify typical characteristics of children with special needs through daily observation, but they lack understanding of the severity of their disabilities and are unable to anticipate or prevent specific behaviors associated with these children. To prevent harm to other children, the preferred approach is to isolate children with special needs from the group. Frontline teachers generally lack direct experience in inclusive education practices. A survey by Zhang Lili et al. on early childhood educators' inclusive capabilities revealed: - A low proportion selected “definitely” for the core competency of inclusive education (teaching ability) - A relatively large proportion selected ‘average’ - A higher proportion selected “definitely not”. [7] This indicates that early childhood educators generally possess low levels of inclusive education competency. In the field of preschool inclusive education, the inclusion of children with special needs within regular classrooms increases role pressure and workload for general educators. However, these challenging demands may also transform educators' sense of responsibility toward individual children with special needs into a commitment to inclusive education, thereby enhancing their sense of efficacy in inclusive education. [8] Role identity emphasizes the professional responsibilities individuals undertake within society. The depth of understanding one has for their assigned role directly impacts their ability to effectively fulfill the responsibilities inherent in that role. For early childhood educators, their long-accumulated experience cannot truly resolve the challenges posed by children with special needs. In practice, they cannot rely solely on their own practical experience, leading them to feel inadequate as inclusive preschool teachers and diminishing their sense of role identity. Currently, early childhood educators on the front lines of teaching bear a heavy workload. Constantly monitoring all children not only drains their energy but, more critically, tests their capabilities. Education is a continuous endeavor that demands ongoing professional development. While teaching techniques improve through practice, pedagogical wisdom and inclusive education skills must also advance. Insufficient skills hinder teachers' role identification, diminishing their sense of value and purpose. This can undermine their commitment to the profession, impede teaching quality, and ultimately create role identification barriers.

#### **3.3. The Dilemma of Group Identity in Resource Scarcity**

Currently, parents are concerned about whether kindergartens and society will accept children with special needs. They worry that these children may be isolated because their behavior appears unusual to peers. Even when bullied by classmates, children with special needs often do not report it to teachers. Only children with mild ASD and no intellectual impairment are admitted to regular kindergartens. Although the Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China explicitly states that “children with disabilities who can adapt to kindergarten life should be supported to attend regular classes,” some kindergartens still refuse to accept children with special needs. Simultaneously, parents of typically developing children often express reluctance to have their children in the same class as children with special needs,

and instances of parents jointly petitioning against such placements occur from time to time. These realities indicate that acceptance levels for children with special needs returning to mainstream education require improvement. Regarding physical environment setup, most kindergartens currently lack specialized resource rooms, fail to create minimally restrictive environments, and lack appropriate materials. Furthermore, the inclusive education practices of preschool teachers result from the combined efforts of kindergartens, families, and society. The quality of teachers' instructional practices is inextricably linked to the collaborative efforts of these three groups. Preschool teachers often face resource scarcity and insufficient support in inclusive education, such as a lack of guidance from special education experts and inadequate assistive technology equipment. These challenges undermine teachers' identification with their inclusive education roles. As the saying goes, "Even the most skilled cook cannot make a meal without rice." The scarcity of social support and professional guidance resources severely hampers the development of preschool inclusive education. According to Chen Jiao et al.'s analysis of social support for preschool inclusive education in China: both government support and professional support levels fall below the overall average for social support. Furthermore, the support and assistance preschool inclusive education teachers can obtain from other professionals remains extremely limited. [9] The unclear professional positioning of the Inclusive Education Guidance Center and the lack of defined responsibilities among its departments have resulted in a severe shortage of staff. This shortage has also led to a lack of corresponding guidance and support services for inclusive education in early childhood settings, hindering its development. Preschool teachers do not derive a sense of professional pride from the social status and salary levels associated with their profession. Consequently, the resignation rate among preschool teachers has remained persistently high in recent years. Given differing developmental goals, value systems, and cultural frameworks, preschool inclusive educators naturally face challenges in establishing a sense of group identity.

### **3.4. Crisis of Cultural Identity in a High-Pressure Work Environment**

In 2016, data from Guangming Daily revealed that "China has 1.7 million special-needs children aged 0-6, with over 70% of preschoolers unable to access early childhood education." This situation is particularly acute among children with autism. However, "most parents of special-needs children hope to enroll their children in special education institutions, preschool classes at special schools, rehabilitation centers run by disability federations, or similar facilities. Some parents also choose to send their children to regular kindergartens." [10] However, relevant legal provisions lack enforceability, leaving caregiving responsibilities often borne solely by families. Cultural identity represents the cultural consciousness and values formed over time by a group. As practitioners in educational settings, early childhood educators pursue high-quality inclusive preschool education and implement child-centered principles, serving as advocates for educational equity and inclusive respect. In some regions, societal cultural attitudes harbor prejudice or discrimination toward children with special needs, which may influence educators' attitudes toward inclusive education. The conflict between cultural beliefs and inclusive education

principles diminishes teachers' sense of professional identity, thereby hindering the development of their inclusive competencies. Hu Sisi et al. also found in their survey of inclusive kindergarten teachers in Shanghai that due to concerns about the impact of children with special needs on kindergarten organization and management, most teachers showed low acceptance of inclusive education and limited openness toward children with special needs. They maintained a neutral stance toward such children entering their kindergartens or classrooms, preferring instead that these children attend special schools. [11] Faced with complex and diverse educational needs and high parental expectations, preschool inclusion teachers often experience significant psychological pressure, which impacts their work effectiveness and personal well-being. Teachers must manage children's emotional issues and behavioral challenges while also handling communication pressures with parents and heavy workloads. This leaves them prone to fatigue and burnout, hindering the high-quality development of preschool inclusion education and the establishment of a shared cultural identity.

## **4. Breakthrough Pathways for Enhancing Early Childhood Educators' Inclusive Competencies Under Identity Theory**

Based on identity theory, preschool inclusive educators must achieve unity between self-construction and external recognition in their professional roles to truly overcome current challenges. This theory emphasizes that individuals form identity through self-categorization, social comparison, and value internalization. Without internal recognition of the "inclusive educator" role, teachers cannot sustain long-term commitment despite extensive external training. Therefore, the breakthrough path must begin with "co-construction from within and without," helping teachers establish their professional identity cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. Preschool inclusive educators face numerous challenges in enhancing their inclusive education literacy, including insufficient professional knowledge, scarce resources, heavy workloads, and low social recognition. Based on identity theory, four corresponding breakthrough paths are proposed. Analysis follows:

### **4.1. Enriching Professional Knowledge to Enhance the Self-Identity of Inclusive Preschool Teachers**

Preschool TeCurrently, the lack of specialized knowledge in inclusive education among early childhood educators inadvertently diminishes their confidence in implementing such practices. Therefore, enhancing systematic and ongoing professional training can boost educators' self-efficacy, thereby fundamentally strengthening their confidence to take action. Specifically, training should not be limited to one-off lectures but designed as a tiered, modular curriculum system. For instance, introductory courses could cover foundational knowledge of special needs children's development and differentiated teaching principles. Intermediate courses would delve into specific curriculum adaptation strategies, behavior support methods, and effective resource room operations. Advanced courses could focus on complex problem-solving in inclusive classrooms, developing individualized education plans, and team collaboration. More importantly, training

must be deeply integrated with practice. Beyond organizing observations of exemplary lessons, establishing “mentorship programs” or “learning communities” is essential. Experienced inclusive educators or itinerant specialists should provide ongoing, on-site guidance, enabling teachers to experiment, reflect, and consolidate new skills in real-world settings. Additionally, establishing effective training evaluation and feedback mechanisms is crucial. Scientific evaluation should be conducted through pre- and post-test comparisons, classroom practice video analysis, and tracking teacher self-efficacy scales. Training content should be dynamically adjusted based on feedback to ensure precise alignment with teachers' actual needs and challenges. This closed-loop model—“theory input, practice support, feedback optimization”—effectively helps teachers transition from ‘knowing’ to “doing,” steadily building professional confidence through accumulated successful experiences.

#### **4.1.1. Strengthen top-level design and emphasize the coordinating power of professional leaders in inclusive education**

In advancing inclusive education, strengthening top-level design is crucial, particularly by emphasizing the coordinating capabilities of professional leadership. On one hand, policy guidance should establish clear inclusive education policies that are forward-looking and actionable, providing a transparent implementation framework for governments at all levels, schools, and relevant institutions. On the other hand, establishing resource centers composed of interdisciplinary teams—including education specialists, special education experts, and psychologists—can not only offer professional support but also drive the sharing of teaching resources and innovative practices. This structured top-level design effectively unifies perspectives, promotes resource integration, and establishes a coordinated, accountable working mechanism. Additionally, kindergartens should serve as bridges for home-school-community collaboration, building inclusive education support networks. They can organize specialized training to enhance teachers' understanding and professional skills regarding children with special needs, while proactively partnering with communities, medical institutions, and nonprofit organizations to provide comprehensive support—including early identification, adaptive teaching, and social integration—for these children. Hosting parent salons and community outreach activities can deepen societal understanding and acceptance of inclusive education, fostering a collaborative, child-centered educational environment. By strengthening top-level design and multi-stakeholder collaboration, the implementation of inclusive education can be systematically advanced, ensuring every child grows in an inclusive environment. This represents not only educational equity but also a hallmark of societal progress. It requires the deep integration of policy, resources, professional expertise, and public participation to collectively build an educational ecosystem that supports the development of every child.

#### **4.1.2. Enhance the depth of knowledge and emphasize the precision of professional training in inclusive education**

Enhancing teachers' knowledge of inclusive education requires precision in training content. On one hand, systematic professional development—such as incorporating special needs awareness into kindergarten teacher certification exams—ensures differentiated instruction reaches every child. Concurrently, in-service evaluations

must assess educators' understanding of inclusive education principles, knowledge, and skills. On the other hand, schools should provide ample opportunities for teachers to participate in off-site training, enriching their experience in educating children with special needs. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched the China Inclusive Education Teacher Capacity Building Project from 2022 to 2025. This initiative focuses on enhancing the competencies of inclusive educators in preschool and compulsory education settings. Its training model differs from previous approaches, utilizing workshops, case studies, group collaboration, and on-site guidance. This targeted yet expansive method has directly benefited tens of thousands of teachers, representing a model worthy of broader adoption. Additionally, schools can partner with specialized institutions to offer regular training courses and workshops on inclusive education concepts for in-service teachers. This enhances teachers' knowledge of special education, equips them with professional curriculum adaptation and teaching strategies, ensures they meet the demands of inclusive education, and ultimately improves the quality of inclusive education while strengthening their professional identity.

## **4.2. Strengthen Practical Experience to Promote Role Identity Among Inclusive Preschool Educators**

Enhancing practical experience requires teachers to gain a thorough understanding of young children. This not only helps educators clarify their tasks and responsibilities in teaching practice but also facilitates proactive role transitions and fosters role identification. In the teaching process, emphasizing children's diversity, cultivating collaborative skills, and supporting all children's learning represent fundamental competencies that every teacher in an inclusive education setting should master. Early childhood educators must address challenging behaviors exhibited by children with diverse special needs, placing heightened demands on their resilience and perseverance. This often leads to a higher incidence of professional burnout compared to other kindergarten teachers. [12] If inclusive education teachers represent a profession that shines brightly under the sun, then burnout serves as the shadow beneath that radiance. Empirical research has demonstrated that teachers' positive psychological qualities exert a significant positive influence on alleviating their burnout and enhancing their professional well-being. [13] Additionally, clear career development pathways can be designed for early childhood educators to enhance their professional identity. The outcomes of inclusive education should be incorporated into teacher evaluations and merit-based recognition systems, actively encouraging educators to engage in inclusive education practices and promoting the holistic development of every young child.

#### **4.2.1. Fostering interdisciplinary organizational capabilities to enhance the innovative capacity of teaching practices**

Teachers' professional competence is the core element for the effective advancement of inclusive education, directly determining the scientific nature of the educational process and the effectiveness of its outcomes. To establish a truly inclusive and accepting environment, teachers must not only possess a knowledge background that integrates special education and general education but also incorporate an “innovative” mindset into instructional design and

implementation. Therefore, continuously strengthening teachers' innovative capacity in the field of inclusive education has become a key pathway to enhancing overall educational quality. Specifically, the cultivation of teachers' innovative abilities can be advanced through the following two approaches:

On one hand, we should actively establish cross-disciplinary and cross-grade teacher collaboration groups to promote the joint design and implementation of inclusive education curricula. By setting up interdisciplinary teaching research teams, organizing specialized workshops on inclusive education, and conducting collaborative lesson planning and discussions, teachers with different expertise can complement each other's strengths. By enhancing practical skills, teachers' role identification is further strengthened. This collaboration not only facilitates the development of personalized activity plans better aligned with the developmental needs of children with special needs but also enriches teaching strategies and resource formats, enabling inclusive education to achieve genuine diversity and inclusivity in both content and form. On the other hand, the empowering role of information technology should be fully leveraged to support teachers in achieving innovative breakthroughs in teaching. Teachers should be encouraged to actively utilize smart teaching tools, such as developing or employing interactive teaching software and visual cue systems tailored to diverse learning needs, to effectively enhance classroom engagement and learning adaptability. Concurrently, leveraging big data and learning analytics technologies enables continuous assessment and feedback on children's development, providing evidence for instructional adjustments to achieve precise interventions and personalized support.

#### **4.2.2. Strengthen the integration of theory and practice to enhance the competitive edge of teachers' teaching practices**

To systematically enhance early childhood educators' professional competence in inclusive education, a multidimensional, tiered training system should be established. This system requires comprehensive planning across time frequency, content design, and learning formats to ensure teachers receive continuous knowledge updates, skill reinforcement, and practical support. Specific recommendations are as follows:

First, establish systematic training that spans the entire career development journey. Professional growth for educators is an ongoing process, and training should be integrated throughout their careers. This should be organized in flexible formats combining irregular and regular sessions, as well as short-term and long-term programs. For instance, monthly in-house workshops could focus on practical skills and methodology practice; quarterly off-site visits or cross-facility exchanges could be arranged to learn from other institutions' best practices; and each semester or academic year could feature a cycle of medium-to-long-term specialized training, such as multi-week advanced seminars. This systematic, multi-tiered approach ensures both the regularity and timeliness of training while maintaining depth and coherence, preventing fragmented learning.

Second, emphasize the practicality of training content. Training themes and course design should closely align with the real needs of frontline teaching, highlighting practical orientation and problem-solving capabilities. Content may cover assessment methods for children with various

disabilities, development and adjustment of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), functional analysis and intervention strategies for common problem behaviors in children with autism spectrum disorders, such as "sitting alone in a corner talking to oneself, playing obsessively with a specific toy, or engaging in repetitive behaviors, and limited interaction with peers." Additionally, training should incorporate policy interpretation on inclusive education, ethical reflection, and teacher self-psychological adjustment to support dual enhancement in both theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Finally, establish a comprehensive institutional framework with appropriate evaluation weightings to motivate teachers to enhance their practical skills and strengthen the integration support system. In training formats, move beyond single-lecture models by prioritizing practicality in design. Organize more small-group seminar activities centered on real-world challenges for in-depth analysis, idea exchange, and strategy development. Simultaneously, organize peer observations and study visits, enabling teachers to observe classrooms and exchange experiences at other high-quality inclusive education institutions.

### **4.3. Deepening Resource Integration to Foster Group Identity Among Inclusive Preschool Educators**

Inclusive preschool education requires multi-stakeholder collaboration and cross-departmental cooperation. It must break free from the entrenched focus of the Disabled Persons' Federation on rehabilitation, the education sector on teaching, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs on subsidies. This necessitates integrating resources from multiple entities including the Disabled Persons' Federation, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs to facilitate seamless coordination among government, families, communities, and institutions. A cross-departmental coordination mechanism should be established, led by the education department or the Disabled Persons' Federation with active participation from other relevant departments.

#### **4.3.1. Improve the multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism and strengthen the support system for the teaching community**

Implementing inclusive education in mainstream kindergartens requires a multi-stakeholder social support system. This encompasses not only placement systems involving values, legal policies, management mechanisms, and funding, but also comprehensive personalized support measures within inclusive classrooms—covering daily care, play activities, and educational content—for children with special needs who enter mainstream kindergartens after individualized training. First, the government should play a leading role by formulating relevant policies and providing financial support to ensure the smooth advancement of inclusive education. For instance, Henan Province became the first province nationwide to promote comprehensive coverage, full integration, and full support for preschool inclusive education by implementing policies such as the Henan Special Education Enhancement Action Plan (2014-2016). Second, schools, as the primary implementers of inclusive education, should establish robust management mechanisms, clarify the responsibilities of all departments and teachers, and ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education. Finally, encourage social organizations,

enterprises, and volunteers to participate in inclusive education by providing resources and support, fostering a positive atmosphere of whole-society engagement.

#### **4.3.2. Adhere to Diversified Development to Enhance the Research Capabilities of the Teaching Workforce**

To effectively support early childhood educators in fulfilling their inclusive education responsibilities, educational institutions must provide them with systematic, multi-tiered professional resources and emotional support to build a sustainable teaching support system. Specifically, efforts can be made in the following areas:

First, professional support should be strengthened by establishing interdisciplinary collaborative teams. In addition to providing general inclusive education training for teachers in mainstream schools, we can also draw inspiration from Alberta, Canada's approach of appointing inclusive education coaches to support the professional development of mainstream school teachers. [14] Additionally, specialized support staff such as special education experts, counselors, and rehabilitation therapists should be deployed to provide teachers with timely, targeted technical guidance and intervention recommendations. This collaborative mechanism not only alleviates the professional pressure teachers face when addressing complex special needs but also enhances the scientific rigor and implementation effectiveness of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Second, the supply of teaching resources and assistive technology equipment must be improved. Diverse resources—including accessible textbooks, communication aids, speech recognition software, and sensory integration training tools—should be provided to help teachers better address the learning needs of children with varying characteristics. Optimizing physical and environmental supports reduces teaching barriers, bolstering teachers' confidence and capacity to implement inclusive education. At the organizational support level, establishing “teacher support groups” can facilitate peer-to-peer exchange of experiences, case discussions, and emotional mutual aid. Such groups foster learning communities, break down potential professional isolation among teachers, and promote the sharing and accumulation of practical wisdom.

Secondly, it is recommended to establish a dedicated “Inclusive Education Curriculum Development Team” focused on designing appropriate, open curriculum plans for all children, including those with special needs. This team could regularly organize inclusive education seminars, lesson case analyses, and achievement showcase events to encourage teachers' participation in curriculum development and reflective practice, thereby enhancing their curriculum adaptability and teaching innovation awareness. Concurrently, a “Warm-Hearted Inclusive Education Workstation” could be set up within the kindergarten. This station serves as a dedicated space for psychological and technical support. When teachers encounter challenging situations or emotional distress during educational practice, they can enter the station at any time to seek professional assistance or take a brief break. This arrangement not only provides teachers with temporary “breathing room” but also helps enhance their psychological safety, professional self-esteem, and sense of organizational belonging, enabling them to engage more positively in their work.

#### **4.4. Fostering an Inclusive and Harmonious Environment to Support Cultural Identity Among Inclusive Preschool Educators**

A positive teaching practice environment fosters cultural alignment among early childhood educators. Educating children with special needs is a societal responsibility that requires collaboration between practitioners, families, and communities. Establishing sustained communication channels among home, school, and community, and maintaining ongoing interaction between educators and families/communities during practice, are crucial measures to enhance teachers' cultural alignment with inclusive education.

##### **4.4.1. Foster an atmosphere of respect and acceptance, providing the driving force for teachers' cultural identity**

An organizational culture of respect and acceptance serves as a vital foundation for building a high-caliber, professional teaching team, primarily manifested through comprehensive recognition of educators' diverse backgrounds. Each teacher possesses unique growth experiences and academic backgrounds; rather than posing obstacles, these differences constitute invaluable resources for enriching educational diversity. Respecting and valuing diversity in academic credentials, teaching experience, theoretical orientations, and even cultural identities effectively fosters knowledge complementarity and innovative integration within the team. At the level of teaching practice, respect and acceptance are concentrated in encouraging innovation and embracing differences in educational philosophies and teaching methods. We should support teachers in flexibly adopting multiple teaching models based on their professional judgment and practical wisdom, continuously adjusting and optimizing them through practice. Whether it's child-centered gamified teaching or structured individualized support strategies, as long as they meet the developmental needs of children with special needs, they should receive full respect and resource support. This open, inclusive professional culture provides teachers with the space to boldly explore.

Furthermore, an atmosphere of respect and acceptance must extend to genuine concern for teachers' work-related stress and emotional well-being. Special education professionals often face heightened emotional demands and professional challenges. Organizations should proactively establish comprehensive support systems for both physical and mental health, such as through psychological counseling, stress management programs, flexible work arrangements, and reasonable incentive measures. These efforts help teachers maintain optimal performance, prevent burnout, and enhance job satisfaction and a sense of belonging. From recognizing diverse backgrounds, embracing teaching differences, and caring for teachers' well-being, to establishing transparent communication and feedback mechanisms, this series of measures collectively builds an organic system supporting teachers' cultural identity. This comprehensive, multi-layered support environment injects teachers with the driving force for continuous development, enabling them not only to stay but to teach effectively.

##### **4.4.2. Strengthen publicity efforts to attract the attention of social forces**

Through advocacy and education, transform societal biases toward young children with special needs and foster an inclusive and accepting environment for integrated education. For example: - Conduct community outreach campaigns to

enhance public awareness and acceptance of inclusive education; - Organize integrated education-themed activities in kindergartens to help typically developing children and their parents understand and support peers with special needs; - Promote the positive impact of inclusive education through media coverage, sharing success stories, and engaging nonprofit organizations.

First, establish “mutual assistance” pairing groups among kindergartens to foster inclusive education practices involving the entire institution, all staff, and the entire process. Under the guidance of education authorities, quality improvement will be driven through a tiered model: selecting pilot kindergartens for inclusive education, followed by practice kindergartens, and culminating in model kindergartens. Adopting a pilot-first approach will accelerate enhancements in teachers' inclusive education capabilities. Additionally, resources from the National Smart Education Platform—such as policy documents, teaching case studies, and public-benefit courses—can facilitate exchange and learning among kindergartens. Through case-based discussions, paired groups will form to conduct targeted research.

Secondly, government departments should extensively promote and actively advance the implementation of inclusive education. On one hand, organizing inclusive education case competitions can encourage kindergartens to observe and interpret children with special needs, thereby enhancing teachers' proficiency in inclusive education. On the other hand, showcasing videos of exemplary teachers through kindergarten official accounts or video platforms can leverage media influence to foster recognition and learning from outstanding educators. This approach will spark public interest in inclusive preschool education, amplify societal attention, and collectively cultivate a cultural environment where teachers are motivated to enhance their inclusive education competencies.

## 5. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of inclusive preschool education is to promote genuine progress and potential development for all young children, including those with special needs, within mainstream settings. The level of inclusive education competency among preschool teachers directly impacts the quality of preschool inclusion. During implementation, close collaboration and co-teaching between general education teachers and special education professionals are essential. The necessary support and services required by children with special needs must be appropriately integrated into the regular classroom. [15] This necessitates that mainstream early childhood educators flexibly master the ability to adapt curricula, integrating inclusive education principles into all activities in practice. While attending to children with special needs, the sense of responsibility, inclusiveness, compassion, and patience of typically developing children can be effectively nurtured. This represents a great endeavor of mutual growth and mutual achievement. Through the implementation of mainstreaming and inclusion principles, diverse educational needs of young children are met, teachers' professional identity is enhanced, and a comprehensive and well-developed support system for inclusive preschool education is established. Identity theory provides a profound and powerful analytical framework for understanding the professional growth of inclusive preschool educators. It elevates teacher competency development beyond mere

accumulation of attitudes, knowledge, and skills, urging frontline educators to reflect on the interplay between “self,” “role,” “community,” and “culture” in practice—a multidimensional, holistic process of inquiry. To a significant extent, the professional growth of early childhood educators transcends the mere accumulation of surface-level teaching practices. Crucially, it hinges on their sense of professional identity and their deep conviction and passion for their vocation. This represents not only a commitment to teacher professional development but also a profound call for building a high-quality, compassionate ecosystem for inclusive preschool education.

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