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Research Article

Ethical Tensions and Collaborative Governance in Inclusive Education: A Dynamic Equilibrium Model from China's Greater Bay Area

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical tensions in China's inclusive education system, where policy-driven efforts to integrate students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream classrooms conflict with systemic challenges in balancing individual rights and collective interests. Despite national progress in SEN enrollment rates, regional disparities persist, Structural contradictions emerge from resource limitations. Ethical dilemmas between SEN students' individualized support needs and the collective rights of typically developing peers. Grounded in Rawlsian justice theory, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of stakeholder interviews at a Greater Bay Area school with a three-dimensional theoretical framework (capability fairness, empathy theory, group dynamics) to address three objectives: demand coordination, leadership transformation, and collaborative governance. Findings reveal systemic issues, including resource allocation conflicts, teacher role dissonance, home-school trust deficits, and innovative strategies such as a dynamic "resource bank" and peer mentorship systems. The study proposes a tripartite governance model integrating institutional flexibility, cultural restructuring, and technological empowerment to reconcile educational equity with quality. Key contributions include operationalizing Sen's capability approach into a dual-cycle evaluation matrix and shifting equity metrics from resource access to functional outcomes. Limitations include regional economic biases and stakeholder perspective gaps. Policy recommendations emphasize phased reforms: class-size regulations, regional resource-sharing platforms, and teacher training overhauls. Future research should expand to urban-rural comparisons and longitudinal evaluations to validate the proposed model's adaptability and ethical implications in diverse contexts.

Keywords

Inclusive Education, Special Education Needs (SEN), Ethical Dilemmas, Resource Allocation, Governance Model

1. Introduction

The ethical practice of inclusive education always creates tension between individual justice and the collective good.

The "inclusive education" framework constructed by the UNESCO Salamanca Statement [1] and the "priority ad-

mission" principle emphasized by China's Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities (revised in 2017) together weave an ideal picture of inclusive education. However, when policy discourse meets educational practice, data monitored by the Ministry of Education shows that the rate of students attending regular classes has significantly increased under policy-driven efforts (from 49.2% in 2015 to 62.8% in 2022). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these policies shows regional attenuation: Shenzhen, as a demonstration area, had an average proportion of SEN (Special Educational Needs) students in regular schools at only 1.2% in 2022, which is 66.7% of the national average (1.8%) Despite this, the ratio of special education teachers to students in regular schools remains high at 1:120 [2]. This attenuation in policy effectiveness reveals a deeper contradiction—the structural conflict between the individualized support needs of special students and the collective interests of regular students.

Against this backdrop, the ethical dilemmas in inclusive education are increasingly prominent [3-5]. primarily manifesting as conflicts between special students' individual rights and the class's collective interests. On the one hand, the legal rights of special students require schools to provide individualized support (such as individualized education plans and psychological interventions) to ensure their equal participation in the classroom [6]. On the other hand, the collective interests of regular students (such as a stable teaching order and a psychologically healthy environment) cannot be ignored. News frequently reports that autistic students' emotional outbursts in mainstream schools not only affect their own learning but also reduce the learning efficiency of their classmates, even leading to joint protests by parents. The essence of these conflicts lies in the tension between the limited nature of resources and the infinite nature of diverse needs [7]. Rawls' "Theory of Justice" provides an ethical framework for this. While prioritizing the rights of the most disadvantaged groups (special students), minimizing harm to other students' interests through institutional design (such as a tiered support system) is necessary. However, the balance in practice often relies on ad-hoc decisions by school administrators, lacking systematic strategies, which further highlights the necessity of constructing a scientific ethical decision-making mechanism.

2. Research Objectives

This study, grounded in the institutional context of inclusive education in China, focuses on the dynamic balancing mechanism between protecting the rights of students with special needs and fostering class cohesion. It seeks to accomplish three primary objectives:
1. Demand Coordination Mechanism: Deconstruct stakeholder dynamics among government, teachers, and parents to establish a multi-stakeholder consultation framework.

2. Leadership Transformation Pathway: Examine the leverage effect of principals' instructional leadership in curriculum adaptation, resource allocation, and organizational culture restructuring.
3. Collaborative Governance Model: Develop a tripartite framework of "institutional constraints-cultural identity-technological empowerment" to harmonize educational equity and quality.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study constructs a three-dimensional theoretical framework for inclusive education, combining the concepts of capability fairness, empathy theory, and group dynamics. The aim is to provide a systematic solution that balances the interests of students with special educational needs (SEN) and typically developing students (TD). This framework employs a dynamic adaptation mechanism to avoid the limitations of traditional educational fairness theories.
1. Value Dimension: Based on the concept of capability fairness, it emphasizes that educational resources should support the development of each student's abilities.
2. Interaction Level: Using empathy theory to redefine teacher-student relationships, enhancing the educational experience through emotional labor.
3. Support Level: Optimizing the class ecosystem through group dynamics to promote resource sharing and capacity building.

This model maintains ethical stability and enhances resilience in complex situations through a dynamic feedback mechanism, ultimately achieving the unity of educational fairness and collective interests. The innovation of this research lies in translating philosophical discussions into educational practice and raising the standard of educational fairness from resource accessibility to functional achievement.

3.2. Participant Selection

The study selected a nine-year public school in the Greater Bay Area for field observation. This school was chosen for its representative geographical location and student structure, providing an ideal scenario for exploring the challenges of inclusive education practice. A combination of purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling strategies was used. Participants included 30 relevant personnel within the school, covering various roles such as teachers responsible for inclusive education, principals, safety officers, class teachers, psychological counselors, and legal advisors. The sample ensured coverage of Teaching experience (3-25 years), Subject areas (core/non-core subjects), Management levels (grassroots teachers/middle management), and SEN student contact density (1-5 students/more than 5 students). Selection criteria in-

cluded their direct involvement in implementing inclusive education and their attention to the needs of SEN students.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed based on the three core dimensions of this study: resource allocation conflicts, teacher role conflicts, and lack of trust between home and school. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes and was conducted online to ensure convenience for participants across different regions. To improve the accuracy of the interview content, recordings were transcribed into text and sent to the interviewees for confirmation. The interview questions aimed to guide participants to reflect on their practical experiences, such as:

1. Resource Allocation Conflicts: Describe whether the support needs of SEN students affect the resource acquisition of other students in the class.
2. Teacher Role Conflicts: How do regular teachers switch between the dual roles of "educator" and "special needs supporter"?
3. Lack of Trust Between Home and School: How do you think parents' demands for privacy protection can be coordinated with teachers' right to know?

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed coding and classification techniques using NVivo12 for three-level coding [8].

(1) Open Coding: Extracted 234 initial concepts; (2) Axial Coding: Formed 17 categories. (3) Selective Coding: Refined 4 core categories. A demand identification-resource allocation-conflict adjustment-benefit evaluation analysis model was established through the constant comparative method, identifying the main themes and patterns emerging from the interviews. The thematic analysis further explored the behavioral characteristics of SEN students and the effectiveness of school response strategies. By comparing the response strategies of different teachers and parents, the study revealed the impact of SEN students on the collective interests of the class. Member checking involved inviting three interviewed teachers to review the analysis conclusions to correct subjective biases; theoretical saturation testing ensured that no new dimensions were added to the coding categories.

3.5. Ethical Review

This study strictly adhered to the ethical standards of the relevant university's Human Subjects Ethics Committee. Before the interviews, all participants were informed of the research purpose, methods, and potential impacts, and informed consent forms were signed. During data processing, the privacy of all participants was protected, and all data were anonymized. A hierarchical data security management system was established:

1. Level 1 Data: Student case information stored with blockchain encryption.
2. Level 2 Data: Teacher interviews are set during a 2-year desensitization period.
3. Level 3 Data: Policy texts openly shared.

Transcriptions were sent to interviewees for confirmation to ensure data authenticity and reliability.

4. Results

4.1. Open Coding Stage

In the open coding stage (Table 1), 234 initial concepts were identified. These concepts reflect the perceptions and experiences of research participants regarding various issues in inclusive education. High-frequency concepts include perceived resource encroachment, emotional labor burnout, and home-school information barriers. These initial concepts laid the foundation for subsequent axial coding, revealing key challenges in the practice of inclusive education.

Table 1. Examples of Open Coding (234 Initial Concepts).

Initial Concept	Frequency
Perceived Resource Encroachment	38
Emotional Labor Burnout	32
Home-School Information Barriers	29
Differentiated Instruction Dilemma	27
Safety Responsibility Shifting	25
Peer Assistance Effectiveness	22
Administrative Intervention Lag	21
Professional Support Suspension	19
Stigmatization Defense	17
Flexible Curriculum Demand	15

4.2. Axial Coding Stage

Through axial coding (Table 2), the initial concepts were aggregated into 17 categories. These categories include resource allocation conflicts, role cognition dissonance, and home-school trust crisis, each corresponding to specific theoretical anchors and practical representations. For example, the resource allocation conflict category reflects teachers' complaints about individualized teaching aids encroaching on the use of public laboratory equipment, embodying the theoretical foundation of capability fairness. These categories help us systematically understand the complex issues in inclusive education.

***Table 2.** Axial Coding (17 Categories).*

Category Name	Concept Clusters (High-Frequency Initial Coding)	Theoretical Anchor	Practical Representation
Resource Allocation Conflicts	Teaching Aid Priority Disputes/Physical Space Contention/Specialized Teacher Scheduling Conflicts	Capability Fairness	Regular teachers complain about "individualized teaching aids encroaching on the use of public laboratory equipment"
Role Cognition Dissonance	Professional Boundary Blurring/Guardianship Responsibility Generalization/Multiple Role Switching Fatigue	Role Conflict Theory	Homeroom teachers describe "having to act as both subject teachers and rehabilitation training supervisors"
Home-School Trust Crisis	Privacy Protection Anxiety/Intervention Authority Disputes/Educational Responsibility Shifting	Social Exchange Theory	Parents refuse to provide complete copies of SEN students' medical diagnosis certificates
Class Ecosystem Reconstruction	Peer Mentor System/Mixed-Age Assistance Groups/Differentiated Task Chain Design	Group Dynamics	TD students form "learning partner circles" to assist SEN students in completing classroom instructions
Institutional Flexibility Deficiency	Insufficient Alternative Plan Reserves/Delayed Emergency Response/Rigid Evaluation Standards	Complex Adaptive Systems Theory	Safety officers report "sudden behavioral issues can only be temporarily handled by security personnel"
Emotional Labor Overload	Empathy Exhaustion/Emotional Masking Costs/Traumatic Event Rumination	Emotional Labor Theory	Psychological counselors mention "needing three days to recover emotionally after dealing with self-harm incidents"
Professional Support Suspension	External Expert Intervention Gaps/School-Based Training Formalization/Interdisciplinary Collaboration Barriers	Professional Community Theory	Resource teachers complain "itinerant guidance experts only visit the school once per semester"
Safety Responsibility Shifting	Risk Management Avoidance/Guardianship Vacuum Periods/Legal Accountability Fears	Diffusion of Responsibility Effect	Subject teachers demand "SEN students must be accompanied by parents during physical education classes"
Differentiated Instruction Dilemma	Multi-Level Goal Setting Difficulties/Teaching Progress Imbalance/Evaluation Standard Fragmentation	Zone of Proximal Development Theory	Math teachers struggle with "preparing three levels of difficulty exercises for the same class."
Stigmatization Defense Mechanism	Implicit Exclusion/Overprotection/Labeling Effect Internalization	Symbolic Interactionism	TD parents jointly request "a separate activity area for SEN students."
Administrative Intervention Paradox	Policy Implementation Deviations/Bureaucratic Obstruction/Innovation Incentive Failure	Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory	Principals mention that "district-level inclusive education assessment indicators are disconnected from actual situations."
Technological Empowerment Gap	Assistive Tool Usage Threshold/Data Collection Ethical Disputes/Technology Dependence Risks	Technology Acceptance Model	Teachers refuse to use "smart monitoring bracelets that record teacher-student dialogue emotions."
Peer Relationship Tension	Social Distance Control Imbalance/Utilitarian Peer Assistance/Group Emotional Contagion	Social Network Theory	SEN students complain, "Friends only help me complete moral education points."
Cultural Identity Conflict	Suspended Inclusive Values/Traditional Educational Concept Inertia/Difference Tolerance Gap	Organizational Culture Theory	Veteran teachers' insistence that "special students should go to special education schools" sparks controversy
Dynamic Evaluation Obstruction	Developmental Data Deficiency / Multi-Stakeholder Evaluation Discrepancies / Delayed Feedback Tracking	Formative Assessment Theory	Individualized Education Plan (IEP) evaluations still rely on end-of-semester one-time tests
Rights Game Concerns	Conflict Between Equal Rights and Priority Rights/Contradiction Between Collective Teaching Rights and Individual Development Rights	Theory of Justice (Rawls)	Parents question, "why should my child slow down learning for special students?"
Organizational Learning Disruption	Fragmentation of Practical Knowledge/Experience Transmission Obstruc-	Organizational Learning The-	New teachers report "completely not knowing how to handle sudden emotional behavior

Category Name	Concept Clusters (High-Frequency Initial Coding)	Theoretical Anchor	Practical Representation
	tion/Lack of Reflection Mechanism	ory	issues."

4.3. Selective Coding Stage

Four core categories were refined in the selective coding stage (Table 3): demand identification mechanism, dynamic resource allocation, conflict adjustment strategies, and benefits evaluation system. These core categories constitute the study's main findings, providing systematic solutions for the practice of inclusive education. For example, the demand identification mechanism uses the "iceberg demand model" to help identify the explicit behavioral problems, implicit developmental needs, and potential crisis warnings of SEN students. These categories provide theoretical and practical support for constructing a scientific ethical decision-making mechanism.

Table 3. Selective Coding (4 Core Categories).

Dimension	Concept
Demand Identification Mechanism	SEN students' "Iceberg Demand Model" (explicit behavioral problems - implicit developmental needs - potential crisis warnings)
Dynamic Resource Allocation	Establish a "resource bank" to achieve time-sharing of teaching aids, manpower, and space
Conflict Adjustment Strategies	Develop a "three-level buffering system" (class consultation - grade arbitration - school expert committee)
Benefit Evaluation System	Construct a "dual-cycle evaluation matrix" (individual development trajectory tracking/class cohesion index monitoring)

5. Results

This study reveals the dynamic, systemic, and contextual characteristics of the conflict between individual rights and collective interests in inclusive education. Essentially, it reflects the practical tension of educational justice across different ethical dimensions. The findings validate Rawls" [9]. difference principle" and its application boundaries: when resource allocation priorities cannot achieve "Pareto optimality," the ethical orientation of institutional design becomes crucial. The discussion unfolds from the three-dimensional framework of the research objectives, integrating theoretical deepening and methodological reflection.

5.1. Multidimensional Dilemmas and Structural Contradictions of Interest Coordination Mechanisms

Resource Allocation Conflicts (Category 1 in Table 2) and Differentiated Instruction Dilemmas (Category 9) point to the root of structural contradictions: the current resource allocation model remains at the level of "physical inclusion" and has not transitioned to "functional inclusion.". emphasize the flexibility of inclusive pedagogy, but this study finds a unique challenge in the Chinese context—when class sizes exceed 40 students (average class size in the study school is 42), the marginal cost of implementing differentiated instruction increases exponentially (Table 1, "Emotional Labor Burnout" frequency 32). This finding aligns with Resource Dependence Theory [10].), indicating that resource constraints in the education system (e.g., imbalanced teacher-student ratios, large class sizes) force teachers to become "resource adjusters" rather than pure teaching practitioners.

Further analysis reveals a "policy-practice gap" formed by the policy-driven increase in the rate of students attending regular classes and the imbalance in teacher-student ratios. This contradiction is common in developing countries. For example, research on inclusive education in South Africa also points out that resource shortages force teachers to compromise between standardized teaching and individualized support [11]. The "resource bank" model proposed in this study (Core Category 2 in Table 3) innovatively borrows from the sharing economy concept, transforming special education support services into public goods for the class through a time-sharing mechanism. Its advantages include:

1. Resource Optimization: Reducing redundant equipment purchases (e.g., cross-class sharing of sensory integra-

tion training equipment);

2. Professional Collaboration: Itinerant teachers can serve multiple classes simultaneously, alleviating manpower shortages;

3. Cultural Co-construction: Enhancing regular students' understanding of inclusive education through resource visibility (e.g., introducing assistive communication devices into regular classrooms).

5.2. Paradigm Shift in Educational Leadership and Distributed Decision-Making

The study finds that the Administrative Intervention Paradox (Category 11) and Professional Support Suspension (Category 7) expose the limitations of the current bureaucratic management model. Principals, as "street-level bureaucrats" [12], face dual constraints in policy implementation: meeting higher-level assessment indicators (e.g., inclusive education coverage rate) and addressing the rights game of parent groups (Category 16). This dilemma reflects public management's "multiple-goal conflicts" [13]. The study school successfully transformed conflicts by establishing a peer mentor system (Category 4), converting TD students' moral development needs into support resources. This practice aligns with the Distributed Leadership Theory [14], forming a collaborative network by empowering multiple stakeholders (psychological counselors, resource teachers, and student leaders). Its advantages include:

1. Knowledge Complementarity: Psychological counselors provide behavioral intervention strategies; resource teachers design individualized learning plans;

2. Risk Sharing: Distributing safety management responsibilities from homeroom teachers to professional teams;

3. Cultural Infiltration: Student mutual assistance behaviors reshape inclusive norms in the class.

However, the risk of "responsibility dilution" must be guarded against. It is recommended to establish a leadership responsibility matrix (RACI model), clarifying decision-making authority (Responsible), accountability (Accountable), consultation rights (Consulted), and information rights (Informed) to avoid execution failure due to role ambiguity.

5.3. Operational Pathways and Adaptive Challenges of the Three-Dimensional Governance Model

The "institution-culture-technology" model constructed in the study needs to address three practical propositions:

1. Institutional Flexibility: Dynamic Evaluation Obstruction (Category 15) requires breaking the mold of end-of-semester one-time evaluations. Introducing "embedded assessment" (Wilson &Sloane, 2000) needs to address data ethics issues, such as the boundaries of collecting behavioral data from SEN students. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) can be referenced to establish hierarchical data access permis-

sions (teachers only access teaching-related data).

2. Cultural Reshaping: The dissolution of the Stigmatization Defense Mechanism (Category 10) requires rebuilding the recognition of "difference legitimacy." Mixed-age assistance groups (Category 4) develop empathy through role-playing (e.g., having TD students experience reading disability simulators), echoing the "embodied cognition" theory in phenomenological pedagogy [15].

3. Technological Empowerment: Facing the Technological Empowerment Gap (Category 12), developing localized tools that align with Chinese teachers' cognitive habits is necessary. For example, transforming the "emotion recognition" function of smart bracelets into classroom interaction heat maps can assist teachers in adjusting teaching rhythms while avoiding individual labeling.

5.4. Extension of Theoretical Contributions and Methodological Reflections

This study operationalizes Sen's capability development theory [16]. into a "dual-cycle evaluation matrix," promoting a paradigm shift in educational equity evaluation from focusing on resource input (e.g., the proportion of special education funding) to evaluating functional achievement (e.g., SEN students' classroom participation rate). This shift aligns closely with the "substantive equality" advocated by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Methodologically, while mixed research design can balance the depth of phenomena and the breadth of data, two limitations need reflection:

1. Context Dependence: Regional economic levels may influence the governance model revealed by case studies. For example, the "resource bank" in the study relies on a digital management platform for equipment, which may face infrastructure limitations in rural schools;

2. Subject Perspective Bias: The study focuses on educators and lacks direct voices from students and parents. Future research can adopt Participatory Action Research (PAR), inviting SEN students to express their needs through photovoice.

5.5. Insights from Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Policy Optimization Pathways

Comparing international experiences, the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legally mandates the protection of SEN students' rights, but this study reveals that the Chinese context relies more on administrative coordination and relational mediation. This difference reflects the fundamental distinction in governance logic between the two countries: rule of law vs. community harmony. Policy optimization is recommended to adopt a "stepwise advancement" strategy:

1. Short-term: Supplement class size and teacher-student ratio redline standards in the Regulations on the Educa-

tion of Persons with Disabilities;

2. Medium-term: Establish regional special education resource-sharing centers, achieving cross-school equipment scheduling through IoT technology;

3. Long-term: Incorporate inclusive education capabilities into the core competencies of teacher training programs, reconstructing teachers' knowledge base.

6. Conclusions

This study reveals the dynamic balance between the individual rights of students with special educational needs (SEN) and the collective interests of the class in the context of inclusive education in China. The findings indicate that the conflict between individual rights and collective interests is systemic and contextual, reflecting multiple ethical tensions in the practice of educational justice. By constructing a three-dimensional governance model of "institution-culture-technology," this study provides a theoretical framework and practical pathways to address these conflicts, emphasizing the necessity of resource sharing, educational leadership transformation, and technological empowerment.

7. Limitations

The influence of regional economic levels on the dynamic resource allocation model remains to be verified. The school in this study is located in an economically developed area, and its resource allocation and management model may differ from those in less developed areas. Therefore, the applicability of the model in schools with different economic levels needs to be confirmed through more diverse samples to ensure its feasibility for widespread application.

Although this study collected a large amount of data through semi-structured interviews, the interview sample may not fully cover the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. For example, the diverse opinions of parents, students, and other educators may not have been fully considered, which could affect the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the research conclusions. Future research should expand the scope of data collection to ensure that more stakeholders' perspectives are included, thereby improving the reliability and applicability of the findings.

8. Future Research Recommendations

Future research should extend to the urban-rural comparison dimension to explore the impact of different regional economic levels on inclusive education decision-making. Significant differences in resource allocation and educational environments between urban and rural areas will help understand the applicability and effectiveness of the dynamic resource allocation model in different contexts.

Conduct long-term field studies to evaluate the actual effects and applicability of the three-dimensional governance model. Short-term studies may not fully capture the dynamic changes and long-term impacts of the model in practice, so continuous observation and data collection are needed to verify the model's stability and effectiveness.

Develop technological tools that align with teachers' cognitive habits and further study their application effects and ethical challenges in inclusive education. The effective application of technological tools can significantly enhance the efficiency and quality of inclusive education, but attention must also be paid to potential ethical issues such as privacy protection and data security.

Abbreviations

SEN	Special Educational Needs
TD	Typically Developing
IEP	Individualized Education Plan
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Acknowledgments

Author Contributions

Wang Yifei: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, and writing an original draft

Liu Hong Dou: Data curation

Liu Zi Ying: Investigation and Visualization

Lo Sing Kai: Supervision, Project administration, Writing, review, and editing

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Funding

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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