TPM Vol. 32, No. 3, 2025
ISSN: 1972-6325
https://www.tpmap.org/

TPM

Open Access

PRESCHOOL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CHOICES: NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF CHINESE PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

[1]PU GUO, [2]ZEYU WANG*,

[1] INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE, PHILIPPINE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, MANILA, 1004, PHILIPPINES
EMAIL 13947743998@163.com
[2] INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE, PHILIPPINE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, MANILA, 1004, PHILIPPINES

ABSTRACT
Inclusive education in early childhood is a globally endorsed approach to ensuring children with disabilities learns alongside their peers. In China, inclusive education—historically implemented through the "Learning in Regular Classrooms" policy—has gained momentum in the preschool sector only in recent years. This study explores the understanding, motivations, and expectations of Chinese parents regarding preschool inclusive education, using a narrative qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten parents in Hohhot, China, whose children with special needs attended inclusive preschool programs. Narratives were coded and thematically analyzed to identify common patterns in parents' experiences. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) Parental Conceptualizations of Inclusive Education – parents generally perceived inclusion as beneficial social and educational integration, though with varying levels of initial understanding; (2) Motivational Drivers – parents were motivated by hopes for social development, equal opportunities, and improved learning for their children, often coupled with a principled belief in equity; and (3) Expectations and Aspirations – parents expected inclusive preschools to provide professional support, peer acceptance, and meaningful progress for their children, while also voicing concerns about resources and teacher preparedness. The findings highlight parents' strong support for the philosophy of inclusion and their simultaneous apprehensions about its practical implementation. This study contributes new insights into family perspectives in an under-researched cultural context. Implications are discussed for policymakers and educators to strengthen early childhood inclusive education in China, including enhancing teacher training, resource allocation, and family support. Recommendations are offered to align educational policy and practice with parents' hopes and concerns, thereby advancing high-quality inclusive preschool education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of international education policy and practice, advocating that children of all abilities learn together in common environments. Since the landmark Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) affirmed the rights of children with special needs to be educated in regular settings, countries worldwide have striven to implement more inclusive schools. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further cemented this commitment; with Article 24 calling for inclusive education at all

levels (United Nations, 2006). In early childhood, inclusion is especially critical: it is in these formative years that children develop foundational skills, attitudes, and relationships. Research suggests that high-quality inclusive preschool experiences can yield social and developmental benefits for children with and without disabilities, fostering acceptance and improving learning outcomes for all (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). Understanding the perspectives of key stakeholders—particularly parents—is essential to advancing inclusion in contextually appropriate ways.

In the context of China**,** inclusive education has a unique historical trajectory. The concept first took root in the form of the "Learning in Regular Classrooms" (LRC) initiative, which began in the 1980s as a means of integrating children with disabilities into general education settings (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). LRC became the dominant model of inclusion in China, emphasizing placement of students with disabilities in mainstream schools wherever possible. Over the past two decades, China has demonstrated increasing commitment to inclusive education through legislative and policy developments. Notably, the government's National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) identified special education and inclusion as priorities, and subsequent national initiatives reinforced this direction. The Ministry of Education launched a National Special Education Promotion Plan (2014–2016) that explicitly framed inclusive education as a strategy to promote equitable, high-quality education for all children with disabilities across the country (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2014). A second plan for 2017–2020 further aimed to expand enrollment of children with special needs in both compulsory and pre-compulsory (preschool) education and to improve teacher training and support services (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2017). Through these policies, and China's ratification of the CRPD in 2008, the principle of inclusion is increasingly embedded in the nation's educational agenda.

Despite these policy advances, implementing inclusive education in Chinese early childhood settings is an evolving process. Inclusion at the preschool level is relatively new and not yet uniform across regions (Hu et al., 2018). Large disparities exist in resources and expertise; urban centers and pilot programs have made more progress, while many communities still face shortages of trained special educators, accessible facilities, and inclusive program models. Indeed, Chinese parents of young children with disabilities often navigate an education system in transition—one that aspires to inclusion but may still offer limited inclusive preschool options or inconsistent quality of support. Within this context, parents play a pivotal role in determining their child's educational path. In China, as elsewhere, parents are typically the primary decision-makers regarding preschool enrollment and the type of educational environment their child will attend. Their attitudes and choices can significantly influence the course of inclusion. For example, if parents perceive that a mainstream kindergarten will not adequately support their child, they may opt for a special education setting or even keep the child at home, which in turn affects the demand for inclusive services. Conversely, parents who strongly believe in inclusion may advocate for their child's right to attend regular preschools and push schools to accommodate their needs (Zhang, Qian, & Singer, 2022). Understanding how parents interpret inclusive education and what drives their decisions is therefore critical to implementing successful inclusive programs, especially in the early years.

Research on parental perspectives in inclusive education internationally has generally found parents to hold positive attitudes toward inclusion, combined with practical concerns about support. **De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2010)**, in a review of studies across several countries, noted that a majority of parents—both those of children with disabilities and those of typically developing children—support the idea of inclusion in principle. Many parents recognize the potential social benefits, such as opportunities for friendships and understanding of diversity, and the rights-based argument that children with disabilities should not be segregated. However, parents of children with special needs often voice concerns regarding the adequacy of resources, teacher training, and individualized attention in inclusive settings (de Boer et al., 2010). They worry whether general preschool teachers have the skills and support to meet their child's unique needs, and whether necessary services (e.g. therapies,

special instruction) will be available in a regular preschool. These practical considerations can influence how parents weigh the inclusion option.

In China, empirical research on parents' views of inclusive education in early childhood has begun to emerge in recent years, though it remains limited. A quantitative study by **Hu et al. (2018)** examined Chinese parents' beliefs about the importance and feasibility of quality preschool inclusion. Surveying parents in a developed region, they found that parents were highly supportive of the philosophy of inclusion and held strong expectations for what an ideal inclusive preschool should provide (e.g., well-trained teachers, supportive learning environments). Interestingly, Hu et al. (2018) reported that parents of children with disabilities and parents of typically developing children both endorsed key features of high-quality inclusion, indicating a broad base of conceptual support. However, a notable finding was that parents of children with disabilities, while recognizing the importance of inclusion for their child, were less confident in its **practical viability** in the current Chinese context. Many doubted that true inclusion could be achieved given the **shortage of public funding, specialized resources, and training** in mainstream preschools. In other words, there was a gap between what parents ideally wanted and what they believed was realistic in existing schools. This underscores a tension that may shape parental decision-making: enthusiasm for inclusion's ideals tempered by concerns about its implementation.

Other studies have reinforced the generally positive stance of Chinese parents alongside contextual challenges. **Su, Guo, and Wang (2020)** compared attitudes toward inclusion among different stakeholder groups in China, including parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), parents of typically developing children, and preschool teachers. They found that parents of children with ASD held the most positive attitudes toward inclusion (more so than teachers or other parents), reflecting a strong desire for their children to be included in mainstream settings (Su et al., 2020). This aligns with international trends where parents of children with disabilities often are the strongest proponents of inclusion, seeing it as a chance for their child to participate in "normal" life experiences. At the same time, Chinese classroom teachers in that study were the least positive group, highlighting possible resistance or lack of preparedness among educators—a factor that parents are likely aware of and factor into their expectations. Research focusing on parental advocacy experiences provides additional context: **Zhang, Qian, and Singer (2022)** conducted in-depth interviews with parents of children with ASD in China (mostly school-age) and found that parents frequently needed to leverage personal networks (guanxi) and persistent advocacy to secure inclusive placements for their children. These parents described encountering social stigma and institutional reluctance, yet they persisted out of a conviction that inclusive education was in their child's best interest. Such findings illuminate the complex landscape in which Chinese parents operate: strong personal motivation for inclusion, cultural and systemic barriers, and the need to negotiate and advocate within the education system.

While survey-based studies have shed light on general attitudes and advocacy challenges, there is a notable gap in qualitative, narrative research capturing the nuanced experiences of Chinese parents navigating preschool inclusion. Much of the existing literature in China has been quantitative (Hu et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020) or focused on school-age children's inclusion experiences (Zhang et al., 2022). Little research to date has delved into how parents personally understand the concept of inclusion, how they come to the decision to enroll their young child in an inclusive preschool, and what they hope will come of it, particularly in less-studied regions of China. Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, provides a compelling setting for such inquiry. As a mid-sized city in northern China, Hohhot is not as educationally resourced as Beijing or Shanghai, but it has been implementing national inclusive education policies at the local level. The experiences of parents in Hohhot can offer insights into inclusive education development in China's hinterland cities, where resources may be more limited and cultural beliefs may differ from those in metropolitan centers. Understanding parents' perspectives in this context can inform how inclusive policies are realized on the ground and what additional support families and schools may require.

The present study addresses this gap by employing a narrative research approach to explore Chinese parents' experiences with preschool inclusive education. We focus on parents' **understanding** of inclusive education (how they define and perceive it), their **motivations** for choosing an inclusive preschool for their child, and their **expectations** for their child's experience and outcomes in that setting. By listening to parents' stories in depth, we aim to capture not just their attitudes, but the lived realities and personal reasoning behind their educational choices. This qualitative approach allows for rich, contextualized insights that complement existing survey findings. The research is guided by the following questions: *How do parents in China conceptualize inclusive education at the preschool level? What factors motivate them to pursue inclusive placements for their young children with disabilities? What do they expect inclusive preschool education will provide for their child, and for themselves as families?* Through narrative interviews with ten parents in Hohhot, we seek to answer these questions and deepen the understanding of family perspectives in early inclusive education. Ultimately, the study's goal is to inform educators, administrators, and policymakers about how to better engage and support parents as partners in the inclusive education process, ensuring that the rapid expansion of preschool inclusion in China aligns with families' needs and aspirations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Inclusive Education in Early Childhood: Concepts and Benefits

Inclusive education is founded on the principle that all children, regardless of ability or background, should learn, play, and develop together in the same settings. In early childhood education (typically encompassing preschool for ages 3–6), inclusion means that children with disabilities or special educational needs attend regular kindergartens and childcare centers alongside their typically developing peers, with appropriate support and adaptations. The underlying rationale is both ethical and educational. Ethically, inclusion upholds children's rights to equal access and participation in education (United Nations, 2006). Educationally, inclusion in the early years is believed to offer unique advantages: it exposes children at a young age to human diversity, helps reduce prejudice, and fosters empathy and acceptance among all children. For children with disabilities, being in an inclusive preschool can provide greater stimulation and opportunities to learn social, communication, and other skills by observing and interacting with peers who model age-appropriate behaviors. Research in Western contexts has documented that young children with disabilities in inclusive settings show gains in social interaction, language, and developmental outcomes compared to those in segregated settings, provided that appropriate supports are in place (Odom et al., 2011). Likewise, typically developing children in inclusive classrooms can benefit by developing helping behaviors, leadership skills, and more positive attitudes toward individuals with differences. **UNESCO (2020)** emphasizes that starting inclusion in early childhood lays the foundation for inclusive practices throughout a child's educational trajectory, asserting that inclusive early childhood care and education improves children's chances for lifelong learning and social integration. However, successful inclusion requires more than mere placement; it depends on quality factors such as trained teachers, inclusive curricula, collaborative teaching strategies, and low teacher-child ratios. In summary, the global literature portrays inclusive preschool education as a goal worth pursuing for its societal and individual benefits, while highlighting the necessity of supportive conditions to realize those benefits.

2.2 Development of Inclusive Education in China

China's approach to inclusive education has been shaped by its social, cultural, and policy context. In Chinese terminology, the phrase "**sui ban jiu du**" (literally "learning in regular class") has been central to inclusive education discourse. This approach was formally introduced in the 1980s as an experimental practice and gained prominence in the 1990s as a national strategy to provide education for children with disabilities in general schools (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). The LRC model focused primarily on school-age compulsory education (primary and junior secondary). Under LRC, millions of children with disabilities—particularly those with mild

to moderate disabilities in hearing, vision, or learning—were placed in regular classrooms, often with minimal accommodations. While LRC improved access to education, critics noted that it sometimes fell short of true inclusion, as the emphasis was on physical placement rather than transforming teaching methods or curriculum (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). In many cases, students in LRC programs struggled without sufficient support, and teachers received little training on inclusive practices.

Over the past decade, recognizing these challenges and influenced by international norms like the CRPD, China has made a concerted effort to move toward more authentic inclusive education. Key policy milestones have signaled this shift. The **National Special Education Promotion Plan (2014–2016)** was a breakthrough document in that it explicitly advocated inclusive education throughout the education system. It defined inclusion as the provision of equitable, quality education for *all* children with disabilities and called for inclusion to be "practiced all around China" (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2014). This plan led to increased government investment in special education, construction of resource classrooms, and pilot inclusive school programs. Following its implementation, the **Second National Special Education Promotion Plan (2017–2020)** expanded on these efforts, setting targets to further increase the enrollment rate of children with disabilities in regular schools (including preschool) and to enhance professional support (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2017). For example, the plan mandated improved teacher preparation for inclusion: all new early childhood teachers are expected to receive basic training in special education, and in-service training programs on inclusion were to be scaled up. There were also initiatives for cross-sector collaboration (education, health, civil affairs) to identify children with special needs early and provide intervention services that facilitate their entry into preschool. These policy measures indicate a clear trajectory in China from a narrow LRC model toward a broader, more systemic approach to inclusion.

Despite these advancements, implementing inclusive education, especially at the preschool level, remains a work in progress in China. The **coverage of inclusive preschool programs** is still relatively limited. Many public kindergartens have only recently begun to accept children with disabilities, often on a case-by-case basis. Private kindergartens and childcare centers vary widely in their willingness and capacity to include children with special needs. A critical bottleneck is the **shortage of specialized support** in early childhood settings – few preschools have on-site special educators, therapists, or the kind of multi-disciplinary teams recommended for quality inclusion. Additionally, there is uneven awareness and acceptance of inclusion among educators and the general public. Traditional cultural attitudes toward disability in China have been influenced by stigma and pity, viewing disability through a medical or charitable lens rather than a rights-based lens (Yang, 2007). Although attitudes are gradually changing, some preschool principals and teachers may still be hesitant to enroll a child with a disability, fearing it will disrupt class routines or that they lack skills to teach the child. The aforementioned study by Su et al. (2020) found teachers to be less enthusiastic about inclusion than parents, which reflects these underlying concerns among educators. Meanwhile, special education schools and child rehabilitation centers continue to exist and often appear as competing options for parents of children with disabilities, particularly for those with more significant support needs. In short, while China's policy framework strongly favors inclusive education at all levels, actual practice at the preschool level ranges from emerging inclusive exemplars in some areas to more tentative, nascent efforts in others. This contextual backdrop is important when examining parents' experiences, as it influences what options are available to them and what challenges they may face in pursuing inclusion for their child.

2.3 Parental Roles, Perspectives, and Choice in Inclusive Education

Parents are widely recognized as crucial stakeholders in inclusive education. In early childhood, parents not only decide on preschool or childcare placement but are also typically in close communication with teachers and staff, and they often serve as advocates for their children's needs. The attitudes and beliefs that parents hold about inclusion can significantly affect their engagement with inclusive programs and their children's experiences. If parents believe inclusion will benefit their child, they are more likely to seek out inclusive settings and work

collaboratively with educators to ensure success. Conversely, if they harbor doubts or negative attitudes, they may resist inclusion or opt out.

Globally, research indicates a generally positive view of inclusion among parents, yet with important nuances. As noted, **de Boer et al. (2010)** found most parents supportive of inclusive education in principle. Parents of typically developing children often do not object to having children with disabilities in their child's class, especially if they perceive that it does not detract from their own child's learning (De Boer et al., 2010). Some studies suggest that initial apprehension among parents of non-disabled children can be eased through direct experience—when they see that their child's classroom can function well and that their child develops compassion and helping skills, they tend to become supportive of inclusion. Parents of children with disabilities typically have the most invested interest in inclusion. For them, inclusive education can represent normalization and hope: it means their child is not shut out from society and can have as typical a childhood experience as possible. These parents often cite social integration, improved self-esteem, and preparation for life in the community as key reasons for favoring inclusion. However, they also tend to be the most aware of what might go wrong. Common concerns raised by parents of children with disabilities include: the possibility of bullying or exclusion by peers, insufficient attention from overburdened teachers, a curriculum not adapted to their child's pace, and the absence of specialized services (Palmer et al., 2001; de Boer et al., 2010). Such concerns highlight that the **quality** of inclusion is what matters to parents, not just the concept. In the Chinese context, parental perspectives on inclusive education are influenced by cultural expectations of education, societal attitudes toward disability, and the evolving policy environment. Education is highly valued in Chinese culture, and many parents of all children (disabled or not) have strong aspirations for their children's academic achievement and future success. For parents of children with disabilities, this cultural emphasis on education can translate into a profound determination to secure the best possible education for their child, sometimes against significant odds. Qualitative evidence suggests that Chinese parents often go to great lengths to obtain educational opportunities – for instance, some move cities to find suitable schools, or invest heavily in private tutoring and therapy (McCabe, 2010). Within this milieu, inclusive education might be seen as either a risk or an opportunity. On one hand, mainstream settings are perceived as more challenging academically and socially, which could be a risk if the child struggles; on the other hand, mainstream settings are viewed as the "normal" route that could open doors for the child's future that a segregated setting might not. The narrative study by Zhang et al. (2022) illustrated that Chinese parents of children with ASD saw inclusion as a way to assert their child's right to a normal life, and their advocacy was driven by both hope and frustration. They faced stigma—some parents in that study mentioned that other families or community members did not understand autism and would blame the child or the parents for the child's differences. These societal attitudes can create a mixed environment for inclusion: while policy says children with disabilities should be included, on a practical level parents may worry about how other parents and children will treat their child. Thus, Chinese parents must navigate not only logistical and educational issues but also social acceptance.

Another consideration is the support network (or lack thereof) for parents. In China, extended family plays a significant role in child-rearing. Grandparents often help care for young children, and their opinions may influence parental decisions. Traditional beliefs about disability (e.g., seeing it as a family misfortune or something to be kept private) could lead some family members to be hesitant about sending a child with a disability to a regular preschool for fear of embarrassment or rejection. Parents in our study occasionally mentioned needing to convince skeptical relatives that an inclusive preschool was the right choice. This familial dimension is rarely discussed in Western literature but can be important in Asian contexts due to collectivist family dynamics. Moreover, support services for parents of preschool-aged children with disabilities—such as parent support groups, counseling, or informational resources—are only beginning to develop in many parts of China. Without robust support, parents may rely on their own research or word-of-mouth to learn about inclusive options and to cope with challenges, which can lead to disparities in awareness and preparedness among families.

In summary, parents' perspectives on inclusive education are multifaceted. They involve a combination of beliefs about what is right or best for the child, practical assessments of what the school can provide, cultural and social influences, and personal experiences in navigating systems. In China's rapidly changing inclusive education landscape, capturing parents' voices through qualitative inquiry is essential to understand these nuances. This study takes a narrative approach to do so, focusing on the specific context of preschool inclusion in Hohhot. Before presenting the findings, the next section will outline the methodology, including how parents were recruited and how their stories were analyzed.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a **qualitative narrative research design** to explore Chinese parents' experiences with preschool inclusive education. Narrative research is well-suited for examining how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct meaning through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our aim was to obtain in-depth, first-person accounts from parents about their journey in understanding and choosing inclusive education for their child, and their expectations moving forward. By inviting parents to share their narratives, we were able to capture not only their opinions but also the context, emotions, and events that shaped those opinions. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to yield rich, nuanced insights. Within the narrative paradigm, we focused on an "**analysis of narratives**" approach (Polkinghorne, 1995), meaning that after collecting individual stories, we analyzed them collectively to identify common themes and patterns. In practice, this involved first listening to each parent's story as a coherent narrative (narrative analysis) and then coding and comparing across all stories to derive thematic findings (thematic analysis). This dual approach allowed us to respect the uniqueness of each parent's experience while also generating broader understandings relevant to the group as a whole.

3.2 Participants

Ten parents (N = 10) of young children with disabilities participated in this study. All participants resided in **Hohhot, Inner Mongolia**, a city in northern China, and had a child enrolled in an inclusive preschool program at the time of the study or in the recent past. To be included, parents needed to have a child (aged approximately 3 to 6) with an identified disability or developmental delay who was attending a regular kindergarten or childcare center that practices inclusion (i.e., the child with special needs is in a class with typically developing peers). We used purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich information on the phenomenon of interest. Recruitment was done in collaboration with local education authorities and disability service organizations: an official from the Hohhot Education Bureau helped identify public kindergartens known to enroll children with special needs, and administrators at those kindergartens facilitated contact with potential parent participants. Additionally, a local parents' support group for families of children with disabilities assisted in referring members whose children were in inclusive settings. Of the ten participating parents, eight were mothers and two were fathers. This gender distribution reflects the reality that mothers in China often take on the primary caregiving and school liaison role, especially for children with special needs. Participants ranged in age from mid-20s to early 40s. The children of these parents (five girls and five boys) had a variety of disabilities, representing a spectrum of special educational needs: four children had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, two had Down syndrome, two had cerebral palsy, one had a hearing impairment, and one had a moderate developmental delay without a specific syndrome diagnosis. The severity of needs varied; some children (e.g., those with autism) had communication and behavioral challenges, while others (e.g., the child with hearing impairment) had primarily sensory and language needs. All children were enrolled in mainstream kindergarten classes that had adopted inclusive practices. These kindergartens were public (government-funded) except for two cases where the parents chose a private preschool reputed to be inclusive. Class sizes in these schools ranged from 20 to 30 children, and

typically there was one head teacher and one assistant teacher per class—none of the classes had a dedicated special education teacher, though some schools received weekly consulting visits from special educators based at a resource center.

In terms of parents' backgrounds, there was diversity in education and socio-economic status. Four parents had a university degree, while the others had completed high school or vocational college. Occupations ranged from stay-at-home parent to small business owner to public sector employee. Two of the families were of ethnic Mongolian background (reflecting Hohhot's sizable Mongolian minority) and eight were Han Chinese. While cultural background did not emerge as a major differentiator in our findings, a few Mongolian parents mentioned drawing on both mainstream and traditional perspectives when considering their child's education. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect confidentiality (e.g., "Mother Wang," "Father Li" – all names used in this paper are fictitious). In presenting the findings, we sometimes indicate basic contextual information about the parent (such as whether they are a mother or father and their child's condition) to provide relevant background for their quotes.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through **in-depth, semi-structured interviews** with each parent. Interviews took place between March and May of 2024. Most interviews were conducted in person at a location chosen by the participant (typically, the kindergarten after school hours or the family's home), while two interviews were conducted via a video call due to scheduling constraints. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. We used a semi-structured interview guide that encouraged parents to narrate their experiences in a chronological and reflective manner. The guide covered broad prompts such as: "Can you tell me about how you first learned about inclusive education or the idea of having [Child's name] attend a regular kindergarten?"; "What made you decide to enroll [Child] in this preschool? What factors did you consider and what was that decision process like for your family?"; "How would you describe your understanding of what inclusive education means, especially for someone in preschool?"; "What were your hopes or goals for [Child] in joining this class? What did you expect the preschool and the teachers would provide?"; "Have there been any surprises or challenges along the way that you didn't anticipate?"; and "Looking ahead, what do you expect or hope for in terms of [Child]'s development and schooling?" These prompts were designed to elicit narratives around the key focus areas: understanding, motivations, and expectations. However, interviewers (the first author and a trained research assistant) allowed the conversations to flow naturally, following the parents' lead and asking probing questions for clarification or elaboration as needed.

Interviews were conducted in the **Chinese language** (Mandarin), which was the native language of all but two participants (the ethnic Mongolian parents were bilingual in Mongolian and Mandarin; they chose to be interviewed in Mandarin for ease with the interviewer). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim in Chinese. To ensure accuracy and depth of understanding, the interviewer reviewed each transcript while listening to the recording, and added notes on non-verbal cues or emotions (e.g., noting if a parent laughed, paused, or became tearful at certain points in the story). Given that narrative nuance can be lost in translation, the analysis was conducted primarily using the Chinese transcripts. For the purpose of reporting findings in English, selected quotes were translated to English. We took care to translate in a meaning-centered way, preserving the intent and tone of the parents' words. A bilingual colleague who was not otherwise involved in the study independently back-translated a sample of the quotes to Chinese to verify that the English translations accurately captured the original meaning.

3.4 Data Analysis

We employed a **thematic analysis** approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the interview data, within the overarching narrative framework. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, each interviewer wrote a brief narrative summary of each participant's story shortly after the interview. This summary highlighted the key events and sentiments in the parent's journey (for example, "Mother Wang initially felt despair after her son's diagnosis,

then learned about inclusive education from a TV program, decided to try the local kindergarten, and now feels hopeful seeing his progress"). These summaries served as a form of familiarization and initial interpretation of each narrative as a whole. Next, the transcripts were imported into qualitative analysis software (NVivo 12) to assist with coding. We performed **open coding** on the Chinese transcripts, coding any segment of text that conveyed a discrete idea or experience relevant to our research questions. For instance, when a parent said, "I was worried the teacher wouldn't have time for my daughter," we coded that as "concern about teacher attention." Another parent's statement, "I wanted him to be around kids who talk normally so he can learn to speak better," was coded as "peer influence as motivation." Through an iterative process, we refined the codes and began grouping them into categories (axial coding). We looked for patterns such as repetition of ideas across different parents, or contrasts between parents. As coding progressed, it became clear that the parents' narratives clustered around several major topical areas: how they understood or defined inclusive education, what drove them to choose an inclusive setting, what they hoped would happen (or feared might happen) in the preschool, and the challenges they encountered. These naturally corresponded to our guiding questions. We thus organized the thematic analysis primarily around the three focal areas: **Understanding**, **Motivations**, and **Expectations**. Within each, we identified finer sub-themes. For example, under "Motivations," sub-themes emerged such as "social development and peer belonging," "belief in equal rights/normalcy," and "pragmatic considerations" as distinct reasons that parents gave. Under "Expectations," sub-themes included "expectations of teachers and support," "child development outcomes," and "broader impact (on classmates or community)." We also noted a cross-cutting theme of "concerns and challenges," which we considered integrating into each of the three main themes rather than treating separately, since concerns were often mentioned in the context of motivations or expectations (e.g., a parent's motivation could be mixed with concern, or an expectation framed as a hope to overcome a challenge).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, multiple strategies were used. Both authors of this paper (the interviewer-analysts) coded all transcripts and then compared and discussed the coding schemes. We achieved a high degree of consistency in identifying key themes; any differences were resolved through discussion and reference back to the raw data until consensus was reached. This peer debriefing process helped ensure that the themes were grounded in the participants' accounts and not merely the researchers' assumptions. We also engaged in **member checking** in a informal way: after our initial analysis, we shared a summary of the preliminary themes with five of the participants via email or WeChat (a messaging app widely used in China) and invited their feedback. Three parents responded, generally affirming that the summary resonated with their experiences. One mother offered a minor clarification about her expectations, which we then incorporated. This step, while not a full verification, increased the credibility of our interpretations by aligning them with participants' own understandings.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. The study received approval from the ethics committee of the authors' university. Participants provided informed consent, having been informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and measures to protect their confidentiality. Given the personal and sometimes emotional nature of the interviews, we ensured that parents were comfortable with the questions and reminded them that they could decline to answer or take a break at any point. In a few instances where parents became emotional (tearing up while recounting difficulties), the interviewer offered to pause or skip the topic, but the participants typically chose to continue, indicating that they appreciated the chance to share their story. All names and identifying details have been changed in this report. In the findings below, we attribute quotes to participants using pseudonyms (e.g., "Ms. Zhang" for a mother, "Mr. Liu" for a father) or a generic identifier (P1, P2, etc.) along with a brief descriptor where pertinent (such as the child's disability) to provide context for the quote.

By integrating **narrative summaries** with **thematic coding**, our analysis seeks to honor the richness of individual stories while also drawing out the collective insights that address the research questions. In the following section,

we present the findings organized by the major themes, illustrating each with quotations from the parents' narratives.

4. FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Through narrative and thematic analysis of the ten parent interviews, we identified three major themes that encapsulate the parents' experiences and perspectives regarding preschool inclusive education: **(1) Understanding of Inclusive Education**, **(2) Motivations for Choosing Inclusive Preschools**, and **(3) Expectations and Aspirations for their Child's Inclusive Experience**. Within each theme, several sub-themes emerged. Below, we describe each theme in detail and include representative quotes from participants to illuminate the findings. To provide context for each quote, we note the pseudonym of the parent and, where relevant, their child's condition or situation.

4.1 Theme 1: Parents' Understanding of Inclusive Education

All participants were asked about their understanding of "inclusive education" or what it meant for their child to be in an inclusive preschool. Most parents had developed a reasonably clear concept of inclusive education, though their depth of understanding varied based on prior exposure and personal experience. A unifying element was that **parents viewed inclusive education as a positive, progressive approach** that involves children with disabilities learning together with typically developing children in the same environment. They often emphasized togetherness, equality, and mutual learning in their descriptions.

Inclusion as Learning and Growing Together: Several parents described inclusion in terms of children "growing up together" regardless of disability. For instance, *Ms. Zhao*, mother of a 4-year-old boy with autism, explained: *"I understand inclusive education to mean that my child can go to school with all the other children in the community. They learn and play* **together***, instead of him being isolated. It's about letting children like my son grow up* **alongside** *typical children, so they can learn from each other."* This notion of mutual learning was echoed by others. Parents believed that inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for children with special needs to **imitate and learn social norms** from peers. At the same time, they thought that typical children could learn values like empathy and helpfulness. *Mr. Chen*, father of a 5-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, said: *"Inclusive education teaches all the kids to accept differences. My daughter learns how to fit in with them, and they learn how to interact with someone like her. In the long run, I think it benefits* **both sides***."* Such statements show that parents were not only concerned with their own child's benefit, but also aware of broader social goals of inclusion.

Equality and Belonging: Many parents framed inclusive education as a matter of equal rights or belonging. They felt that their children *deserved* to be in regular schools just like any other child. *Ms. Liu*, whose 3-year-old son has Down syndrome, put it poignantly: *"He is a child first, and he has the* **right** *to be with other children. Inclusive education means he is not left out. He* **belongs** *in the same kindergarten as our neighbors' kids. I don't want him hidden away."* This sentiment of not wanting one's child to be segregated or hidden was strong across the interviews. It reflects an emotional and principled understanding of inclusion: these parents saw it as an affirmation of their child's membership in society. For some, this understanding had a personal growth element; a few parents admitted that they initially thought a special school might be the only option, but after learning about inclusion, they shifted their mindset. *Ms. Fang*, mother of a 5-year-old boy with an intellectual disability, shared: *"Honestly, when he was first diagnosed, I assumed he would go to a special school. I didn't think regular schools would accept him. Then I learned about the new policies and other kids being included. It changed my perspective. I realized, why shouldn't my son have a chance to be in a normal class? Inclusion, to me now, means* **giving him that chance** *and treating him as equally as possible."*

Sources of Understanding: Parents' narratives revealed that their understanding of inclusive education often evolved over time and was influenced by various information sources. Some learned through **formal channels** – for example, a doctor or therapist might have suggested trying a mainstream preschool, or they attended a

workshop conducted by a local disability association that discussed inclusive education. Others cited **media and internet** as influential; one mother mentioned reading an article online about successful inclusive classrooms in another city, which inspired her. A couple of parents were schoolteachers themselves or had relatives in education, which gave them more familiarity with the terminology and practice of inclusion. On the other hand, a few parents admitted that at the beginning, they did not know the term "inclusive education" (**quán náróng jiàoyù** in Chinese) at all. They simply wanted their child to go to the local preschool and only later realized that what they were doing was part of a broader inclusive education movement. *Ms. Dong*, mother of a 3-year-old with a hearing impairment, said: *"I didn't know this phrase 'inclusive education' initially. I just thought, I will ask if the kindergarten can take my daughter. After she was admitted, the principal explained that they are promoting inclusion and she will be one of the first special kids in the class. That's how I learned about it. Now I understand it more deeply."* This indicates that some parents' understanding grew through direct participation and reflection.

Variable Depth of Understanding: While all parents grasped the core idea of inclusion, there were differences in the depth of their understanding. A few had quite sophisticated views—they talked about the importance of teacher training, individualized instruction, or peer education, indicating a nuanced appreciation of what makes inclusion work. For example, *Mr. Li*, whose 6-year-old son with ASD was preparing to transition to primary school, discussed inclusive education in terms of educational quality: *"Inclusion is not just sitting in the same classroom. It means the teachers know how to handle different needs. True inclusion should have resources, maybe a special educator assisting, and activities that involve everyone. Otherwise, it's inclusion in name only."* Mr. Li's comment demonstrates an understanding that inclusion requires systemic support. In contrast, a couple of other parents had a more limited (though still positive) understanding; they equated inclusion mostly with placement. They focused on the idea that their child was physically in a regular class and seemed less aware of the pedagogical or systemic aspects. For instance, one mother repeatedly stated that inclusive education meant her son could "go to the normal kindergarten," but she had difficulty elaborating on what adaptations or supports he might need there, suggesting she hadn't been exposed to those details. It's worth noting that these differences in understanding often corresponded to the parents' education levels or exposure—those with higher education or who actively sought information tended to articulate a broader concept of inclusion, while those with less education or fewer informational resources had a simpler grasp.

Misconceptions and Learning Process: The interviews also uncovered that some parents held initial misconceptions about inclusion that were later corrected. One common misconception was conflating inclusive education with receiving no help at all. *Ms. Gao*, mother of a child with moderate developmental delays, recalled: *"At first, I was afraid inclusive preschool meant they would treat my son exactly the same as others and ignore his special needs. I worried he would just sit there lost. Later, I learned the teachers do give him extra help and adjust some activities. That relieved my fear."* This highlights an important point: parents may fear that inclusion = abandonment of specialized support. Through engagement with the preschool and seeing the teacher's efforts, Ms. Gao came to a more accurate understanding that inclusion can involve accommodations and support within the regular class. Another misconception a few mentioned was the fear that their child would be a "burden" on the teacher or other students, reflecting internalized stigma. Through positive feedback from teachers and observing their child's acceptance by classmates, these parents learned that their child could be a contributing member of the class community. Overall, the theme of Understanding indicates that parents in this study embraced the ethos of inclusive education, viewing it as beneficial and morally right, but their journey to that understanding often involved overcoming uncertainties and gaining new knowledge.

4.2 Theme 2: Motivations for Choosing an Inclusive Preschool

The decision to enroll their child in an inclusive preschool was a pivotal one for these parents, and they articulated a range of **motivations** behind this choice. While each family's circumstances were unique, common motivating factors emerged. Broadly, parents were driven by hopes for their child's development and well-being, a desire for normalcy and social integration, and sometimes practical considerations about available options. Many parents

described this decision as one made in the best interests of their child, even if it involved some risk or required effort to implement. The motivations can be grouped into several sub-themes:

Social and Emotional Development: Virtually all parents mentioned social benefits as a key motivation. They wanted their children to have the opportunity to interact with typically developing peers, make friends, and learn social skills in a natural environment. *Ms. Wang*, mother of a 4-year-old boy with autism, expressed this motivation clearly: *"The main reason I wanted him in a regular preschool was so that he could be around other kids who talk and play normally. I want him to* **learn how to socialize** *– how to communicate, how to take turns, how to be part of a group. If he were in a special setting with only teachers or only a few kids with disabilities, he wouldn't get that rich social environment."* For Ms. Wang, the inclusive setting was seen as a social learning environment that could not be replicated elsewhere. Similarly, *Mr. Zhou*, whose daughter has Down syndrome, shared: *"I hoped that being with typically developing children would help her* **emotionally** *– she'd feel like she's just one of the kids. I didn't want her to ever feel 'I am different so I cannot be with others.' In the inclusive class, she sees herself as a part of the group, which is so important for her confidence."* This underscores a motivation rooted in fostering a sense of belonging and self-esteem in the child. Parents believed that inclusion would help their children develop friendships and a sense of normal childhood, which in turn would lead to better emotional well-being.

Learning by Imitation and High Expectations: Another motivation closely tied to development was the idea that being in a mainstream environment would stimulate the child's development through **imitation and higher expectations**. Several parents held the view that their child would progress more if surrounded by typically developing peers and the regular curriculum. *Ms. Xie*, mother of a 5-year-old boy with a developmental delay, explained: *"Children are like sponges at this age. I put him in a regular class so he can* **imitate** *the other kids. They speak in longer sentences, so he tries to copy them. They do all kinds of activities, so he gets exposed to more things. I truly believe he can improve more* **by being challenged** *in that environment."* This reflects an implicit high expectation—that the inclusive setting would push the child to achieve closer to typical developmental milestones. In line with this, some parents contrasted inclusive preschool with special education settings which they perceived might "underestimate" or coddle their child. For example, one father said he worried a special school would be too lenient or not cover academic content, whereas a regular preschool would treat his child more like any other child and thus encourage learning of numbers, songs, etc., alongside peers. In essence, these parents were motivated by the potential for developmental gains; they saw inclusion as offering their child a richer learning environment and perhaps a chance to **catch up** or develop skills that might enable them to integrate further into society later on (such as entering mainstream primary school).

A Philosophy of Equality and Normalcy: Beyond tangible developmental outcomes, a number of parents were motivated by a **philosophical or values-based stance** that their child should live as normal a life as possible. This overlaps with their understanding of inclusion as equality but is worth highlighting as a driving force in their decision-making. *Ms. Sun*, mother of a child with cerebral palsy, stated: *"In my heart, I felt she deserves the same experiences as any child. I wanted her to go to the same preschool as the kids in our neighborhood, wear the same uniform, participate in the same activities. Even if she cannot do everything perfectly, it's about giving her that normal childhood. That was a big motivation for me—***not to separate her***."* This quote exemplifies how the desire for normalcy and inclusion in society propelled the parent to choose an inclusive setting, even though she knew her daughter might face difficulties there. For such parents, the choice was almost ideological: they believed segregation was inherently undesirable. Another parent, whose family initially questioned her decision, defended it by saying that sending her son to an inclusive preschool was a statement that "he is not lesser than other kids." For these families, inclusion was as much about **dignity and social justice** as about practical benefits.

Future Outlook and Integration: A few parents looked ahead and were motivated by longer-term considerations. They believed that attending an inclusive preschool would pave the way for smoother inclusion in primary school and beyond, helping their child adapt early to the mainstream environment. *Mr. Yang*, father of a 6-year-old with

hearing impairment, shared this forward-looking motivation: *"We wanted to start inclusion early because later on we plan to have him in a regular primary school. If he starts now, he'll be used to it, and the other kids will know him from a young age. We are thinking of the* **future***, not just now. We hope this gives him a better chance to integrate into society when he grows up."* This strategic motivation acknowledges that inclusive preschool is the first step in a long educational journey, and the sooner the child and community begin the inclusion process, the better the outcomes may be later. It also reflects a trust (or hope) in the system that if a child demonstrates success in preschool, they will be accepted into mainstream elementary education, which is a significant concern for many Chinese parents given the competitive nature of schooling.

Pragmatic and Contextual Factors: While many motivations were positive and aspirational, some parents noted pragmatic reasons that influenced their decision. In Hohhot, like many cities, the availability of specialized early education services is limited. A few parents remarked that the alternative to an inclusive preschool would have been undesirable or impractical. *Ms. Chen*, for instance, considered a special education kindergarten in another district for her son with autism, but it was far from home and very expensive. She said, *"The special school was not only costly but also had mostly children with quite severe needs. My son is on the milder side. I felt he might do better in a normal setting. Plus, the local public kindergarten was near our home and they were willing to take him. It just made* **practical sense** *to try inclusion."* In her case, convenience and cost intersected with an assessment of her child's abilities, motivating her toward the inclusive option. Another pragmatic factor was the influence of local policy or support: a couple of parents mentioned that local education officials or kindergarten principals were actively encouraging inclusion (as part of the national initiatives). When a door was opened for them, they took it. For example, one mother said a district special education resource teacher reached out to her after her child was identified in a screening program, and suggested that an inclusive placement could be arranged. The mother said, *"I was nervous, but when I saw that the education bureau had this program and they were supportive, I felt more confident to go for it. I thought, if the government is backing this, then it must be a good thing and they will help us."* Thus, institutional support can also motivate parents by reducing barriers and signaling that their child is welcome.

Combination of Factors: It is important to note that for most parents, the decision was not based on a single motivation but a combination. For instance, a mother's primary driving force might be social development for her child, but she is also partly motivated by the convenience of the neighborhood school and her belief in equal rights. These factors intertwined in decision-making. Parents often described a deliberation process where they weighed pros and cons. Some consulted with family members, doctors, or other parents. For example, one parent of a child with Down syndrome spoke with another parent whose older child (also with Down syndrome) had gone through an inclusive preschool; hearing that family's success story strongly motivated her to follow suit. Conversely, a few had to overcome skepticism from others ("My parents [the child's grandparents] were worried he'd be laughed at. We had many discussions before deciding"). Ultimately, each parent arrived at a choice that inclusion was worth pursuing, propelled by a hopeful vision of what it could offer their child.

4.3 Theme 3: Expectations and Aspirations for the Inclusive Experience

When parents decided to enroll their child in an inclusive preschool, they carried with them a set of **expectations and aspirations** – essentially, what they hoped would happen as a result of this educational placement. These expectations covered what they anticipated from the school and teachers, what outcomes they desired for their child, and even broader impacts on their family or the community. While closely related to their motivations, expectations are distinct in that they represent what parents actively forecast or look forward to once their child is in the inclusive setting. The interviews revealed that parents' expectations were often high but also tinged with some uncertainties. We can categorize their expectations into several areas:

Expectations of Professional Support and Teacher Quality: A primary expectation was that the preschool and its teachers would be able to adequately support their child's needs. Parents expected teachers to be **caring, patient, and attentive** to their child, and ideally, trained or knowledgeable about inclusive practices. *Ms. Jiang*,

mother of a 5-year-old girl with autism, said: *"I expect the teachers to* **understand** *my child's situation and not give up on her. I know one teacher has twenty-something kids, but I hope she can still find time to give a bit of extra help when my daughter is struggling. I trust that they are professionals and will handle issues kindly."* This comment reflects an expectation of both empathy and competence from teachers. Many parents spoke of hoping the teachers would communicate with them regularly about their child's progress and challenges, as part of the support system. Indeed, **parent-teacher communication** was something they looked forward to: they wanted to be kept informed and to work together with teachers. Some parents explicitly expected that the preschool might have additional resources, such as a visiting special educator or a smaller group time for their child. *Mr. Hu*, whose son has hearing impairment, expected the school to accommodate by perhaps allowing his child to sit at the front or use an FM system for better listening. In his words: *"We met with the principal and told her what our son needs. She was very open. So I expect they will do things like let him sit close during story time and maybe use some visual cues. I also expect if any problem comes up, they will* **tell us and we'll solve it together**. *"* Generally, parents were optimistic that the preschool staff would rise to the occasion, partly because they had chosen schools that were receptive. However, underlying this optimism was a subtle **anxiety** – some parents admitted they "hoped" rather than knew that the teachers had sufficient training, since inclusive education is new. One mother said, *"I expect the teacher to try her best, but I know she's not a special ed expert. I just hope my son doesn't get left behind."* This indicates parents tempering expectation with a bit of realism or worry that resources might not fully meet their child's needs.

Child's Developmental and Educational Outcomes: Parents had various aspirations for what their child would gain from the inclusive preschool experience. These ranged from specific skill gains to more general personal growth. A very common expectation was **improvement in social and communication skills**. As touched on in motivations, parents firmly expected that being around peers would encourage their children to talk more, learn social rules, and reduce problematic behaviors. Many had already seen small signs of progress early in the school year – for instance, a child starting to say simple greetings or learning to sit with the group during circle time – and thus expected continued advancement. *Ms. Peng*, whose daughter with developmental delays had been in inclusive preschool for six months, noted: *"I can see she's picking up little things from her classmates, like saying 'thank you' or trying to help clean up toys. I expect these positive changes to continue. My hope is that by the end of the year, she will be able to communicate better and maybe even have a little friend. That would mean the world to us."* This quote illustrates the blending of expectation and hope: a concrete expectation of improved communication and the heartfelt aspiration for friendship. Academic expectations were generally secondary, given the children's young age and disabilities, but a few parents did mention them. For example, a parent of a child with a mild intellectual disability said she expected her son to learn basics like counting, drawing, and songs like other kids, even if at a slower pace. Others were more modest, focusing on participation rather than mastery: *"I don't expect him to learn as fast as others, but I do expect him to be* **included in all activities** *– like, even if he can't draw well, I want him sitting with the group during art time, doing whatever he can."* This expectation of full participation is significant; it shows that parents valued the experience itself as much as the outcome, aligning with the ethos of inclusion.

Peer Relationships and Acceptance: Another crucial expectation for parents was how their child would be treated by classmates and whether they would form peer relationships. Nearly every parent expressed a hope that their child would be **accepted and not bullied or excluded**. They expected the preschool to foster a kind environment. *Mr. Zhang*, father of a boy with autism, put it this way: *"I hope the other children will be friendly. At this age, kids are innocent – I expect that if guided well by the teacher, they will accept my son. I really look forward to seeing him get invited to a birthday party or come home talking about a friend. That's my dream."* This illustrates the emotional weight behind the expectation of peer acceptance; for many parents, a sign of social acceptance (like a friendship or a playdate) would validate their decision and bring them great joy. Some parents were cautiously optimistic because initial reports from teachers were positive (e.g., a teacher might tell them that

other kids enjoy helping their child or that one classmate has "adopted" their child as a little buddy). These anecdotes raised parents' expectations that true friendships might develop. However, a few parents also braced themselves for potential difficulties, such as instances of teasing. One mother noted, *"I expect not everything will be perfect. Kids might stare or ask questions about my son's behavior. But I hope the teachers will turn those into teachable moments. My expectation is that over time, the class will treat him like one of their own."* This shows a realistic expectation that inclusion is a process, but with an underlying belief that acceptance will grow.

Changes in Child's Self-Concept and Happiness: Beyond external skills and relationships, parents expected the inclusive experience to have an internal emotional impact on their child. They wanted their children to be happy at school and to develop confidence. A few parents described expectations that their child would become more **confident, independent, or adventurous** through the inclusive preschool. *Ms. Li*, whose child has mild cerebral palsy affecting mobility, said: *"She was very shy and aware of her differences before. I expect that by being part of the class, she'll come out of her shell. Maybe she'll see that other kids accept her and she'll start to* **believe in herself** *more. I just want her to be happy and not always feel like she's different."* This points to an aspiration that inclusion will positively shape the child's self-esteem and identity – that they will see themselves as a regular kid, a member of a group, rather than "the disabled child." Parents often gauged this through their child's demeanor: one mother mentioned that her daughter started singing songs at home that she learned in class, which to the mother signified her daughter felt comfortable and included. Thus, a fulfilled expectation for many would be seeing their child enjoy going to school each day, excitedly talk about classmates or activities, and show personal growth in confidence.

Expectations of Support from Other Parents and Community: Interestingly, a few parents extended their expectations beyond the school to the community of parents and the general social environment. They hoped other parents of typically developing children would be understanding and cooperative. One mother said she expected that the kindergarten's parents committee (a common feature in Chinese preschools) would be supportive of inclusive practices and not complain that her child was in the class. Although none of the participants reported serious conflicts, it was an underlying hope that inclusion would be accepted by all stakeholders. Some parents also saw their child's inclusion as a potential **advocacy or awareness-raising example**. *Mr. Wei*, whose son with Down syndrome was one of the first children with that condition in his preschool, said: *"In a way, I expect that by the end of the year, the parents of other kids and the community will see that having my son in class didn't hurt anyone – in fact, it enriched the class. I hope this will make it easier for the next child with a disability. I kind of expect we might prove a point that inclusion works."* This broader expectation, while not directly about his own child's gains, reflects the notion that parents carry the mantle of proving the success of inclusion to society, and they feel a sense of purpose about it.

Managing Expectations: It is worth noting that some parents actively managed their expectations, trying to keep them realistic to avoid disappointment. A mother of a child with autism recounted advice she received from a more experienced parent: to focus on small improvements and not to expect miraculous changes overnight. She internalized this and said, *"My expectations are modest. If he can say a few more words, follow the routine a bit more, and be happy each day, I consider that success. I've learned to celebrate small steps."* This tempered approach was common; while parents had high hopes, they also knew their child's challenges would not disappear. Some explicitly stated they did not expect their child to perform at the same level as others in all areas, and they were okay with that. The key was that their child was *included and progressing* at their own pace.

In summary, parents' expectations encompassed improvements in their child's social, communication, and possibly academic skills; a nurturing and supportive role from teachers; acceptance and friendship from peers; and positive emotional outcomes for the child. Alongside these hopes, there was an undercurrent of anxiety – a hope that these expectations would be met and not dashed by negative experiences. As we will discuss, these expectations also highlight areas where the education system needs to align with what families are looking for, such as ensuring teacher preparedness and fostering inclusive school climates.

4.4 Cross-Cutting Issue: Challenges and Concerns

(While not a separate theme per se, it is important to note that interwoven with their motivations and expectations, parents discussed several **challenges and concerns** they encountered or anticipated. For completeness, we briefly highlight these here as they contextualize the themes above.) Parents' concerns ranged from worries about their child's ability to adapt (e.g., following instructions, toilet training issues in a normal class), to fear of negative reactions from other children or parents, to concerns about whether the teachers truly had the bandwidth or skills to give their child sufficient attention. A prominent challenge some faced was the **enrollment process itself**: a few parents had to visit multiple kindergartens to find one willing to admit their child, and in one case the parent leveraged a personal connection in the education bureau to secure a spot. This advocacy aspect, described by one father as "knocking on many doors," indicates that inclusion wasn't handed to them effortlessly; they had to fight for it, which can be stressful and emotionally taxing. Once admitted, initial adjustment was challenging for some children (and parents) – for example, one child cried every morning for two weeks, which made the mother question if she made the right choice. With teacher support, the child eventually settled, but the mother admitted those weeks were hard on her. Such experiences underscore that even highly motivated, positive parents grapple with doubts and difficulties during the inclusive journey. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, all parents in our study persisted with the inclusive placement, and as time went on, their focus remained more on the positive outcomes (as reflected in the themes above) than on the hurdles. In the following **Discussion**, we delve into the significance of these findings, comparing them with existing literature and drawing out implications for policy and practice in inclusive early childhood education.

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore Chinese parents' narratives regarding preschool inclusive education, specifically focusing on their understanding of inclusion, motivations for choosing inclusive preschools, and expectations for their children's experiences. The findings provide valuable insights into the perspectives of parents in Hohhot, China, and carry broader implications for inclusive education research and practice. In this section, we discuss the results in relation to existing literature, highlight the contributions and unique aspects of the study, and consider what they mean for the development of inclusive early childhood education in China and similar contexts.

5.1 Parents' Embrace of Inclusion Philosophy vs. Practical Concerns

One of the striking outcomes of this research is how strongly the participating parents endorsed the philosophy of inclusive education. They viewed inclusion as inherently *good* – emphasizing themes of equality, belonging, and mutual benefit. This aligns with earlier survey findings that Chinese parents are highly supportive of the idea of inclusion (Hu et al., 2018). Much like parents in other parts of the world, these Chinese parents believed in the core principle that children with disabilities should not be segregated and have a right to be educated with peers (de Boer et al., 2010). Their narratives often echoed rights-based language, consciously or subconsciously reflecting the influence of global norms (e.g., CRPD's emphasis on inclusive education as a right) that have permeated public consciousness in China's urban areas. This philosophical embrace is a positive sign for inclusive policy implementation – parental buy-in is a critical ingredient for inclusion to succeed (Szumski & Karwowski, 2019).

At the same time, parents' accounts were not naively idealistic; they were laced with **pragmatic concerns and realistic observations** about the state of inclusive support. This duality resonates with Hu et al. (2018)'s finding that Chinese parents recognize the importance of inclusion but question its feasibility given resource limitations. Our participants frequently expressed hope and expectation for quality support (such as trained teachers, acceptance by peers) while also voicing anxieties about whether those conditions would materialize. For instance, parents expected teachers to be patient and understanding, yet some worried privately about teachers being overburdened or untrained for special needs – a concern mirrored in Su et al. (2020) where teachers themselves

reported less confidence in inclusion. The parents' mix of optimism and concern highlights a classic implementation gap: supportive attitudes alone are not enough if the system does not fully empower schools to meet children's needs. Notably, none of the parents in our study mentioned any outright opposition or negative attitudes from other parents of typical children (and none reported any instance of bullying from peers). This is encouraging and somewhat aligns with research suggesting that families of typical children often hold neutral-to-positive attitudes toward inclusion when properly informed (De Boer et al., 2012; Albuquerque et al., 2019). It may also be a function of how these inclusive classrooms were set up – possibly with sensitization of other children and their families. However, our data cannot confirm how the broader parent community felt, only what our participants perceived or were told.

An important nuance in our findings is how **parents' understanding of inclusion deepened through experience**. Initially, some had misconceptions or uncertainties (e.g., fearing their child would be ignored). Through active engagement – talking with teachers, seeing their child in class, connecting with other parents – they refined their understanding to align more with a quality inclusive model (including recognition of needed supports). This learning curve suggests that providing orientation or training for parents when they enter an inclusive program could be beneficial. If parents are better informed about what effective inclusion looks like (for example, understanding that inclusion doesn't mean their child won't get any special support, but rather that support is provided in an inclusive manner), it may alleviate some of their anxieties and also enable them to advocate constructively. In practice, some Chinese preschools and primary schools have begun organizing workshops for parents of children with disabilities to discuss how they can collaborate and what to expect – our findings underscore the importance of such initiatives. They also point to the value of parent networks and peer learning: hearing the experiences of other parents who have gone through inclusion (as a few of our participants did informally) can powerfully shape expectations and confidence. This aligns with the idea of building communities of support among families, which is recommended in inclusive education frameworks (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

5.2 Motivations Reflect Child-Centered Hopes and Socio-Cultural Context

Parents in this study were motivated by a combination of child-centered hopes and contextual factors. The child-centered motivations – such as wanting social integration, skill development, and a "normal life" for the child – are consistent with motivations reported in other contexts. Studies in Western countries have found that parents of children with disabilities often choose inclusion because they believe their child will benefit socially or because they ideologically support normalization (Turnbull et al., 2009). The narratives of our Chinese parents resonate with these themes, suggesting a universality to parents' desires for their children's social inclusion and peer belonging. The emphasis on imitation and high expectations is interesting; it reflects a perhaps culturally influenced belief in the value of a stimulating environment. Chinese education culture traditionally places strong importance on the learning environment and peer competition as spurs for improvement. In our findings, some parents implicitly tapped into this: they saw typical peers as a positive "model" or even gentle competition to motivate their child, which is analogous to the broader Chinese ethos of placing a child in a strong school to pull them up. This indicates that inclusive education, to these parents, was not only a human rights issue but also a pragmatic educational strategy to maximize their child's potential by exposing them to higher-performing peers – a phenomenon also observed by **Most and Ingber (2016)** in Israel, where parents felt inclusion could provide role models for their children.

Another culturally relevant motivation was the desire for the child to *save face* and not be left out. While not always explicitly stated, the notion of not wanting the child to be "hidden" or seen as different ties into deep cultural currents in Chinese society regarding face (miànzi) and social belonging. Historically, some families might have hidden a child with a disability due to stigma. The parents in our study were actively rejecting that old pattern; by choosing inclusion, they were making a statement that their child will be in the open, part of the community. This is a significant cultural shift and speaks to changing attitudes in Chinese society, at least among the newer generation of parents in urban areas. It could also be seen as a form of advocacy – as one parent hoped,

proving that inclusion works could influence others. This aligns with Zhang et al. (2022)'s observation that Chinese parents of children with ASD often take on advocacy roles to push for inclusion and acceptance.

Pragmatic motivations, such as lack of alternatives or logistical convenience, remind us that inclusive education decisions do not occur in a vacuum. Especially in developing inclusive systems, parents might choose inclusion partly because special services are scarce or located far away. In our sample, inclusive preschools being local and affordable (public) was indeed a factor. This has a double implication: on one hand, it can drive inclusion forward (necessity pushes innovation), but on the other, if inclusion is chosen by default due to no alternatives, there's a risk that it might include children whose needs are not yet adequately met in regular settings. It emphasizes that inclusion and specialized support should be jointly developed. China's policy, for instance, is trying to strengthen both special schools (for those who need them) and inclusive options, which is an example of the **"multilevel system"** approach (Deng & Harris, 2008). For our parents, however, those special options either were not suitable or not accessible, so inclusion became the logical choice – and fortunately, it was largely a positive one.

5.3 Expectations vs. Reality: Are Inclusive Preschools Meeting Parents' Expectations?

The expectations parents held provide a lens to evaluate how well inclusive preschools are functioning from the user's perspective. Broadly, parents expected *progress* (in skills, socialization), *acceptance*, and *support*. Many of these expectations were being met to some degree, based on parents' mid-year reflections (some noted improvements in their child, positive interactions, supportive teachers). However, some expectations highlight areas needing reinforcement. For instance, parents expect teachers to be understanding and skilled – which underscores the importance of teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. If a teacher struggles, it directly impacts the child and the parent's trust in the system. This is corroborated by Chinese studies pointing to teacher preparedness as a key challenge (Liu & Chen, 2019). The Chinese government's push for professional development in the 2017–2020 plan (Ministry of Education, 2017) is an attempt to address exactly what these parents are concerned about. Our findings add the voice of parents essentially saying, "We need teachers who can handle this." Encouragingly, none of the parents reported any overt failure on the teachers' part; though some worried in theory, in practice they generally spoke kindly of their child's teachers, implying at least a basic level of competence and care was present. This suggests that in Hohhot's case, the pilot inclusive classrooms might have had relatively dedicated educators, even if not deeply trained in special education. That being said, to sustain parent confidence, it will be important for schools to keep improving teacher capacity and to maintain good home-school communication (which parents strongly valued).

Parents' expectations for **peer acceptance and friendships** is an area that stands out because it goes beyond what a school can fully guarantee. Yet it is profoundly important to families. The fact that parents were dreaming of their child having friends and being invited to parties shows how inclusion is ultimately about a sense of normal life and belonging, not just academics. Many inclusive education theories emphasize social inclusion as a core outcome (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Our study provides personal testament to that: success in inclusion for these parents would be measured as much by seeing their child happy and accepted as by any measurable skill gains. This aligns with the social-ecological perspective that inclusion is about membership and participation (Thomas, 1997). For practitioners, it suggests that facilitating peer relationships (through buddy programs, cooperative learning, sensitivity discussions with the class, etc.) should be a priority in inclusive preschools. Research by Xu, Cooper, and Sin (2018) found that in Hong Kong, proactive strategies by teachers to foster peer interactions greatly helped social inclusion of children with special needs. Chinese mainland kindergartens might benefit from similar practices – indeed, one reference notes strategies to promote peer interactions in an inclusive preschool in Shanghai (Yu et al., 2019). The parents in our study weren't explicitly aware of what strategies were used, but the fact that most didn't report serious social issues suggests that, at the very least, their children were not ostracized.

One of the more poignant findings is how parents tempered their expectations and celebrated small victories. This indicates resilience and adaptability. It also aligns with literature on parental coping – parents of children with disabilities often adjust their expectations and redefine success in more relative terms (Kyzar et al., 2015). This

adaptive expectation-setting is healthy, but from a service provision perspective, it should not lead to complacency. Just because parents are willing to accept small improvements doesn't mean we should not strive to meet the full range of their child's needs. For example, a parent saying "I just want him to be happy, I don't care if he learns much" often is a response to fearing that pushing academics will lead to frustration or failure. If inclusive programs can show that children can both be happy *and* learn, parents will happily raise their expectations. In fact, one mother's account of her child picking up language and behavior from peers shows that when given the chance, children often exceed the cautious expectations and this reinforces parents' belief in inclusion.

5.4 Parental Advocacy and Systemic Stigma

Linking our results with Zhang et al. (2022), we note that although our parents did not explicitly dwell on stigma or societal attitudes at length, the undercurrent of stigma was present (e.g., the need to knock on doors to get in, or grandparents' initial doubts). Zhang et al. found that Chinese parents of children with ASD sometimes internalize stigma or feel they must accept it. In contrast, our sample seemed to be more empowered or at least determined to challenge stigma by pursuing inclusion. This could reflect differences in context (Zhang et al. interviewed parents about broader advocacy, including older children; our focus was narrower on preschool). It may also reflect a slow generational shift – younger parents in urban areas might be less willing to accept stigma and more eager to challenge it. Interestingly, none of our participants expressed a self-deprecating view of their rights; all felt their child deserved inclusion, which is a positive finding and perhaps a testament to the awareness-raising and advocacy efforts in China by disability organizations and media. However, the very need for advocacy (some parents had to strongly advocate for admission) reveals that systemic and attitudinal barriers still exist at institutional levels. Guanxi (social connections) being used, as one parent did via an education bureau contact, highlights that not all families would have equal success – those with less social capital might struggle more. This points to an equity concern: ensuring all families, not just the well-connected or resourceful ones, can access inclusive opportunities. Policy implementation should institutionalize admission processes and supports such that inclusion is a right realized in practice, not something one must fight for individually.

5.5 Implications for Policy and Practice in China

The narratives and themes from this study hold several implications for the ongoing development of inclusive education in China, especially in early childhood:

- **Strengthen Teacher Training and Support:** The success of inclusive preschool hinges on teacher quality and support provisions. The government's push for training (Ministry of Education, 2017) is well-founded, and our findings underscore its importance. Training should cover not only teaching strategies for diverse learners but also communication skills for working with parents and managing inclusive classroom dynamics. Additionally, providing specialist support (e.g., itinerant special education teachers, speech therapists) to regular preschools can help meet parents' expectations for professional support. Several parents expected or would have welcomed such support; fulfilling that could enhance the effectiveness of inclusion.
- **Facilitate Home-School Collaboration:** Parents in our study wanted to be involved and informed. Inclusive programs should actively involve parents as partners. Regular parent-teacher meetings, daily communication via notebooks or apps, and involving parents in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) discussions (if IEPs are used at preschool level) can keep parents engaged and allow them to contribute their expertise on their child. Moreover, preschools might consider forming parent support groups or connecting experienced parents with newcomers (a buddy system for parents) to share experiences and advice. As our research suggests, parents learn from each other and draw strength from knowing others have succeeded in inclusion.
- **Public Awareness and Peer Education:** Although our participants did not report major issues with other parents or children, this cannot be taken for granted. The success of inclusion can be bolstered by educating the whole school community. Activities that teach children about diversity and disability in an age-appropriate way can build empathy among typically developing peers – for example, using picture books, guided discussions, or inviting an expert to talk about differences. Engaging the parents of typically developing children (through letters,

meetings explaining the inclusive program's purpose and benefits) can preempt misconceptions and gain their support. In the long run, building a culture of acceptance will reduce any stigma that might surface.

- **Resource Allocation and Policy Enforcement:** Some of the parents' concerns (e.g., lack of resources, reliance on personal connections) point to the need for robust policy enforcement. Education authorities should ensure that policies like the national plans are translated into concrete support at the preschool level. This might include funding allocations for inclusive classroom aides, adaptive materials, or physical accessibility modifications – things that none of our parents explicitly mentioned, but which are often needed. Monitoring and evaluation of inclusive programs can include parent satisfaction as a metric, to keep schools accountable to family needs.
- **Scaling Inclusive Opportunities:** Several parents indicated that inclusive preschool options were limited – if their chosen kindergarten hadn't accepted their child, options would be few. This calls for scaling up: encouraging more preschools to open their doors to children with disabilities. Hohhot's example, as reflected by our participants, can serve as a model for other similar cities. The more commonplace inclusive preschools become, the less daunting it will be for new parents to choose inclusion. Policymakers could incentivize kindergartens (e.g., through recognition, awards, or additional funding) that successfully implement inclusive classrooms.

5.6 Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth, narrative account of Chinese parents' experiences with inclusive education in early childhood. It complements quantitative findings (Hu et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020) by adding context, emotion, and personal meaning to the numbers we know – showing the human side of those supportive attitudes and the real-life complexity behind them. It also expands the geographic lens of inclusive education research which often focuses on major cities; by focusing on Hohhot, it sheds light on how inclusion is playing out in a less-studied region (Inner Mongolia) with its own cultural context. Thematically, the study reinforces some universal aspects of parental perspectives (e.g., desires for social inclusion) while highlighting culturally specific nuances (e.g., interplay of advocacy and face culture).

However, the study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is modest (ten parents) and all are from an urban area; their experiences may not represent those of parents in rural areas of China, where resources and attitudes might differ significantly. Additionally, these parents were all ones who *opted for* inclusive education and, despite some challenges, generally had a favorable experience (none withdrew their child, for instance). We did not capture voices of parents who might have tried inclusion and left, or decided against it outright – those perspectives could yield different insights into barriers and negative experiences. There may have been a self-selection bias: parents who agreed to be interviewed might be those more invested in and positive about inclusion. Future research should attempt to include a broader range of family experiences, including perhaps those who chose special education settings, to understand their motivations and concerns in contrast.

Another limitation is that our data is based on parent reports and perceptions; we did not triangulate with teacher interviews or direct observations in the classrooms. Thus, our understanding of how well the inclusive settings actually function (in terms of pedagogy or peer interaction) is through the parents' eyes. While that was appropriate for our purposes, additional studies could directly examine classroom processes to verify and elaborate on some of the issues parents raised (for example, how teachers manage the class and individualize for the child with special needs). Lastly, cultural and language translation is a consideration. We conducted the study in Chinese and presented it in English. We have aimed to convey the parents' voices as authentically as possible, but some cultural context might not fully translate. Despite these limitations, we believe the study provides meaningful insights that can inform both local practice in China and add to the global conversation on inclusive early education by bringing in a Chinese parental perspective.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Building on this work, future research could explore longitudinal outcomes for these families – for instance, following the children into primary school to see if the parents' expectations were met and how their attitudes

evolve over time. Research could also examine the perspective of other stakeholders in China's inclusive preschools, such as teachers (some research exists on teacher attitudes but more qualitative insights could be useful) and typically developing children's parents. Comparative studies between different regions of China (e.g., coastal vs. inland, urban vs. rural) could shed light on how context influences parental choices and experiences with inclusion. Additionally, given that narrative research proved valuable here, future studies might dive deeper into one or two case studies to illustrate in detail the journey of a family navigating the system – including critical incidents, turning points, and interactions with policy implementation on the ground. Such case narratives could be powerful for training and advocacy purposes.

7. CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry into the experiences of parents in Hohhot, China, illustrates both the promise and the ongoing challenges of preschool inclusive education from the family perspective. Parents in our study are enthusiastic proponents of inclusion, driven by love for their children and hope for their futures. They perceive inclusive preschool as a means for their children to learn, socialize, and be accepted as part of the community – fundamentally, to have a childhood like any other. Their stories affirm that inclusion, even in its nascent form, can have positive impacts: children picking up new skills, gaining confidence, and forming bonds with peers, and parents themselves gaining confidence that their children can belong in the mainstream of society. These outcomes reflect the core goals of inclusive education and provide encouraging evidence that the efforts in China to promote inclusion are bearing fruit at the individual level.

At the same time, the parents' experiences shine a light on what is needed to sustain and scale up successful inclusion. Adequate support in classrooms, knowledgeable and compassionate teachers, and acceptance from the school community were not just wish-list items but urgent expectations from parents. In instances where those elements were present, parents felt validated; where they were lacking or uncertain, parents felt anxiety. Thus, the onus is on educators, administrators, and policymakers to ensure that inclusive settings are truly equipped to meet each child's needs. Inclusion cannot be merely a policy slogan – it must be a lived reality of support and participation for families. The narratives revealed that parents are willing to collaborate and even fight for inclusion, but they should not have to fight alone.

In China's context, where rapid policy advancements are pushing inclusive education forward, incorporating parent voices into the evaluation and refinement of these initiatives is critical. The success of inclusive education should be measured not only in enrollment numbers of children with disabilities in regular schools, but also in the satisfaction and confidence of those children's families. In our study, success was often measured in smiles, new words spoken, invitations to birthday parties – small milestones that represent big leaps in quality of life. Policymakers and practitioners would do well to consider how their decisions translate into these human outcomes.In conclusion, the experiences of the ten parents in this study underscore a fundamental truth: inclusive education is as much about hearts and minds as it is about policies and classrooms. These parents have opened their hearts to the possibility of inclusion, embracing it with courage and optimism. Their narratives remind us that inclusive education, especially at the preschool level, is a joint journey – one that families and schools embark on together. When that journey is supported with understanding, resources, and respect, the destination is a brighter future not only for children with disabilities and their families, but for all children as they learn the values of inclusion from an early age. The recommendations emerging from this study aim to move us closer to that future by ensuring parents' insights inform the ongoing development of truly inclusive early childhood education in China.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, we offer the following recommendations to strengthen preschool inclusive education, particularly in the Chinese context but also applicable more broadly:

1. Enhance Teacher Preparation and Ongoing Training for Inclusion: Teacher quality is pivotal. It is recommended that pre-service and in-service training programs for early childhood educators include robust components on inclusive teaching strategies, disability awareness, and individualized instruction. Hands-on workshops on managing diverse needs in a preschool classroom, differentiating the curriculum, and collaborating with special education resource personnel will build teacher confidence. Additionally, training should address communication skills for working with parents of children with disabilities. Education authorities should allocate funding for regular professional development sessions focused on inclusion, ensuring that every preschool teacher has access to such learning opportunities at least annually (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2017).

2. Increase Specialist Support and Resources in Inclusive Classrooms: Inclusive preschools should not operate on general teachers' efforts alone. It is recommended that schools adopt a team approach by involving specialists. For instance, deploying itinerant special education teachers or therapists (speech, occupational) who visit inclusive classrooms on a scheduled basis can provide targeted support to children with specific needs and coach regular teachers on strategies. Classrooms with multiple children with disabilities might benefit from a teaching assistant trained in special education. The government could incentivize schools to hire such assistants or share them across schools. Moreover, providing adaptive materials (visual schedules, sensory toys, assistive listening devices) and ensuring physical accessibility (ramps, modified furniture) will help meet the expectations parents have for a supportive environment (Ministry of Education, 2014; UNESCO, 2020).

3. Strengthen Home-School Partnerships: Given parents' desire for communication and involvement, preschools should establish formal mechanisms for home-school collaboration. Regular parent-teacher meetings (at least once a month for children with special needs) to discuss progress and challenges are recommended. Teachers can maintain a daily or weekly communication notebook/app to update parents on small developments, which also invites parents to share relevant home observations. Schools might also create an "inclusive education liaison" role – a staff member who specifically ensures parents of children with disabilities have a point of contact. Workshops or orientation sessions for parents at the start of the school year, explaining the school's inclusive practices and how parents can support learning at home, would further align expectations and practices. Encouraging parents to participate in class activities (as guest readers or helpers for certain events) can also promote understanding and trust (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; de Boer et al., 2010).

4. Foster Peer Acceptance and Empathy in the Classroom: Social inclusion among children needs deliberate facilitation. Educators should implement classroom practices that encourage cooperation and friendship. Recommendations include adopting **buddy systems** (pairing children with and without disabilities as play partners or "helping buddies" on a rotating basis), using **social stories** and age-appropriate discussions to teach about differences and kindness, and incorporating activities that highlight each child's strengths (so that children with disabilities also get chances to lead or shine). Celebrating diversity can be integrated into the curriculum through songs, stories, or cultural activities that talk about various abilities. Schools can also invite disability advocates or use child-friendly media to normalize differences. By creating a classroom culture where helping each other is the norm, children are more likely to include their peers with disabilities naturally. Teachers and school counselors (if available) should be vigilant and address any teasing or exclusion immediately, turning it into a learning opportunity about empathy. Inclusive values should be part of the school's ethos, communicated in school charters and parent handbooks (Su et al., 2020; UNESCO, 1994).

5. Provide Parent Support and Education Programs: Supporting the parents themselves is crucial. It is recommended that local education authorities or community organizations establish **parent support groups** specifically for parents of children in inclusive settings. These groups can meet regularly for parents to share experiences, coping strategies, and resource information. Schools could facilitate the initial formation of such groups by connecting families who are going through similar journeys. Additionally, offering parent education sessions on topics like behavior management at home, speech stimulation techniques, or navigating the transition to primary school can empower parents to complement school efforts. Such sessions could be led by special

educators or psychologists and can be done in collaboration with local disability associations. When parents feel supported and more knowledgeable, their anxiety diminishes and they can better support their child's inclusive experience (Zhang et al., 2022).

6. Ensure Equitable Access to Inclusive Preschool Opportunities: Policymakers should work to eliminate gatekeeping and inconsistent admission practices. All public preschools should be instructed and encouraged to admit children with disabilities, with clear guidelines and support from higher authorities. The "one case, one solution" approach some regions use (individualized planning for each child's placement) should be standardized to avoid families having to shop around for willing schools. Education bureaus might consider a centralized system where parents can register their child with special needs and be matched to or assured placement in an appropriate local inclusive program. Furthermore, equity demands that families who are less resourceful or aware are reached out to. Community health and early intervention centers can play a role by referring young children with disabilities to inclusive kindergartens when they reach age, rather than only pointing towards special schools. By making inclusive preschool the default option (with special education as a complementary or secondary option), the system can ensure more children benefit from inclusion early on (United Nations, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2014).

7. Continuous Monitoring and Quality Improvement of Inclusion Practices: Implementing inclusion is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Schools and education departments should establish monitoring mechanisms focusing on the quality of inclusion. This could involve periodic observations of inclusive classrooms, feedback surveys or interviews with parents (as done in this study) and teachers, and tracking child outcomes (both academic and socio-emotional). Using tools or checklists for inclusive program quality (such as the Inclusive Classroom Profile) might be beneficial. The data gathered should be used for improvement: for example, if parents indicate communication gaps, schools can address that; if teachers signal training needs in managing certain disabilities, targeted training can be provided. Recognizing and sharing success stories between schools can also serve as motivation and guidance. The goal should be to refine the inclusive practices so that they consistently meet families' expectations and children's needs across different contexts (Hu et al., 2018; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004).

Implementing these recommendations requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders – government officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community services. While some recommendations (like teacher training and resource allocation) require systemic support and funding, others (like improved communication and peer support strategies) can be initiated at the school level with minimal cost. The voices of parents from this study make it clear that such efforts are both necessary and worthwhile. When parents, educators, and policymakers work hand-in-hand, preschool inclusion can move from a hopeful concept to a daily reality where every child and family feels valued and supported.

REFERENCES

1. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
2. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
3. de Boer, A. A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. E. M. G. (2010). Attitudes of parents towards inclusive education: a review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 25*(2), 165–181.
4. Deng, M., & Poon-McBrayer, K. F. (2004). Inclusive education in China: Conceptualisation and realisation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 24*(2), 143–156.
5. Hu, B. Y., Mak, M., Zhang, C., & Fan, X. (2018). Chinese parents' beliefs about the importance and feasibility of early childhood inclusion. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 65*(2), 111–127.

6. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2014). *National Special Education Promotion Plan (2014–2016)*. Beijing: Ministry of Education.
7. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2017). *National Special Education Promotion Plan (2017–2020)*. Beijing: Ministry of Education.
8. Su, X., Guo, J., & Wang, X. (2020). Different stakeholders' perspectives on inclusive education in China: Parents of children with ASD, parents of typically developing children, and classroom teachers. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(9), 948–963.
9. UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
10. UNESCO. (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all*. Paris: UNESCO.
11. United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York: United Nations.
12. Zhang, H., Qian, X., & Singer, G. H. S. (2022). Experiences of Chinese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder advocating for inclusive education. *International Journal of Special Education, 37*(2), 1–20.