



An Exploration of Resource Teachers' Identity in the Context of Inclusive Education: A Case Study of Pre-School and Compulsory Education Schools in a County in Zhejiang Province

Zixuan Wang

College of Education, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 2577726903@qq.com

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Abstract

To further investigate resource teachers' identity status in inclusive education and to develop their identity appropriately, a survey was conducted with 40 resource teachers at the preschool and compulsory education stages in a county in Zhejiang, based on the theories of identity crisis, cognitive-affective theory, and social constructivism. The findings include a serious gender imbalance and restricted promotional channels among resource teachers in the county. Although the identity levels remain relatively high due to favorable national policies and greater social recognition of these teachers, further improvement in contextual identity remains necessary. As many as 45% of resource teachers are part-time workers, and almost one-fifth have no experience of special education training. Some teachers lack special education knowledge. For various reasons, including heavy workload, low salary, differences in compensation with other positions, a lack of county-level special education training programs, and poor social recognition of their professional skills, special resource teachers have an inadequate professional identity. Based on this study, recommendations have been made regarding professional standards, staff and welfare issues, enhancing professional training and awareness, and establishing a collaborative system among the family, school, and community. This is meant to maximize the performance of resource teachers as teams and improve inclusive education practices.

Subject Areas

Pedagogy

Keywords

Inclusive Education, Resource Teacher Identity, Special Education

1. Introduction

The 2016 guidelines for building specialized special education resource classrooms in ordinary schools suggested that resource classrooms should have competent resource teachers [1]. It marked the first time that the professional identity of resource teachers was identified by national-level education policies. As mentioned in the Second Phase Special Education Improvement Plan (2017-2020) issued by the Ministry of Education in 2017, there is a need to provide inclusive education resource teachers and specialists to support the education of students with disabilities in regular schools [2]. There are many roles played by resource teachers, such as helping identify students' special education needs, delivering both group and individualized instruction, guiding subject teachers, bridging communication channels between home and school, facilitating multidisciplinary collaboration and documenting information. It highlights the significant role that resource teachers play in advancing inclusive education and is essential to ensuring the provision of quality education to students with special needs in ordinary primary and secondary schools and kindergartens.

Nevertheless, identifying the role of the resource teacher as a new category of teacher in the development of inclusive education in China remains a critical challenge. Firstly, the majority of resource teachers in ordinary schools are currently assigned or hired from other subjects within the school. Therefore, their background in special education is rather limited. Also, they serve as school administrators and educators, teaching other subjects. Different identities require resource teachers to switch roles, which eventually results in identity conflicts and an identity recognition crisis.

In 2024, the number of students with special educational needs in Zhejiang Province was 28,874, including 14,039 pupils who studied in special education schools, and 2910 and 14,835 disabled students who studied in ordinary schools (in ordinary classes, special classes in ordinary schools, and home schooling) [3]. As one of the most important provinces in terms of both population and economic development, Zhejiang Province also has many special education students, and those attending general schools account for more than 50% of the total. The practice of inclusive education is widely carried out. Therefore, the issue of resource teachers' identity awareness in the background of inclusive education in Zhejiang Province is very important for special education here.

2. Concept Definition

The definition of inclusive education in China is similar to that in other countries in the sense that "Children with special needs will be able to really participate in

pre-school education, basic education, and higher education together with other children without disabilities, utilizing the maximum potential of children with special needs” [4].

The main characters who take charge of implementing the resource classroom program include resource teachers, whose functions include planning, constructing, applying, and managing resource classrooms for special education and related fields [5]. Teacher identity is defined as a dynamic process in which teachers understand, belong to, and practice their professional identities and social positions within sociocultural contexts and educational practice interactions through self-reflection [6]. As a new type of teacher, the definition of resource teacher identity cannot be separated from the reflection on teacher identity. According to relevant studies by scholar Zhu Zehong, the concept of resource teacher identity can be defined as the self-identification and shared cognition within the resource teachers’ community, encompassing both critical reflections and value positioning made by resource teachers as individual professionals, as well as the social expectations placed on them by society or others [7].

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Identity Crisis Theory

The identity crisis theory stems from Erikson’s psychosocial theory, which holds that if one reaches a “necessary turning point” and one’s identity problem cannot be resolved successfully, an identity crisis is likely to manifest in various ways [8]. An identity crisis occurs during the dynamic process of identity reconstruction, in which not only internal individual needs but also external structural elements can trigger it [9]. Previous studies have revealed that the main pressures on resource teachers include administrative, development, miscellaneous, and moral pressures. When these types of pressures are combined, an identity crisis might occur [10].

3.2. Cognitive-Affective Theory

The Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS), proposed by Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda, is a dynamic personality system composed of Cognitive-Affective Units (CAUs) [11]. This theory posits that personality differences stem from the interaction between CAUs and situations. CAUs encompass five types of units: encoding, expectations and beliefs, emotions, goals and values, and abilities and self-regulation planning. Different situations activate specific combinations of units, resulting in context-specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses [12]. Resource teachers are not fixed identity labels, but rather exist within the specific context of the “ordinary school-integrated environment” where their implicit cognitive-affective systems are continuously activated, adjusted, and reconstructed. In this process, the cognitive system of resource teachers receives stimulus information from various sources at any given time and processes intricate, contradictory signals. In various situations, resource teachers face contradictory choices between ordinary school teachers, resource teachers, and special education personnel.

3.3. Social Constructivism Theory

Social constructivism theory, proposed by scholars such as Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes that knowledge and identity are constructed through the combined effects of social interaction and cultural background. Social constructivism believes that individual cognition, understanding, and identity are not isolated but are constructed through interactions with the social environment and others [13]. In inclusive education practice, the identity of resource teachers is primarily shaped through interactions with itinerant guidance teachers, colleagues, students, and student parents. While imparting relevant knowledge to students, resource teachers also engage in various educational activities, interact with students, manage classrooms, and communicate with students and parents, further establishing and developing their teacher identity.

4. Study Design

4.1. Research Approach

This paper focuses on resource teachers as the research object and aims to collect quantitative data on overall attributes and differences in identity recognition among resource teachers in compulsory and preschool education stages in ordinary schools in a county in Zhejiang Province, using a questionnaire survey. This study aims to explore the current status of resource teachers' identity in inclusive education through descriptive analysis, and to provide a reference basis for enhancing resource teachers' sense of identity and promoting the development of special education.

Drawing on previous studies on teacher identity at home and abroad, this research delves into the concept and structure of teacher identity. To be precise, this research modifies and perfects the scale questionnaire developed by Chinese scholars Zhu Zehong and Wang Yu, based on which this study constructs the Likert scale for the "Survey Questionnaire on Resource Teachers' Identity in Ordinary Schools" in four aspects and thirteen factors: personal identity, professional identity, academic identity and situational identity.

4.2. Data Collection

This study selected a total of 42 kindergartens and primary schools in a certain county in Zhejiang Province randomly, with one resource teacher from each kindergarten or primary school as the research subject. A questionnaire survey was conducted through an online platform. Before the survey, the purpose of this study and the confidentiality principles followed by the study were explained to the respondents, allowing them to fill out the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. 42 questionnaires were returned, and after eliminating 2 invalid questionnaires, 40 valid questionnaires were obtained. The collected data were then organized and analyzed using SPSS 25. For the reliability and validity analysis of the questionnaire, the reliability analysis was first performed. According to the results, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the overall item of the "Ordinary School Re-

source Teacher Identity Recognition Questionnaire” was 0.959. The four dimensions’ Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients for the personal identity recognition, professional identity recognition, academic identity recognition and situational identity recognition were 0.943, 0.936, 0.874 and 0.828, respectively (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. Results of questionnaire reliability analysis.

Reliability statistics	
Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of terms
0.959	21

To further analyze resource teachers’ identity recognition, descriptive statistics are conducted across the following dimensions (See **Table 2**).

Table 2. The dimensions of this study.

Index Classification	Indicator Name	Question
Personal identity recognition	Self-awareness	A1. I am enthusiastic about working in special education. A2. I believe that resource teachers should genuinely like, care for, and respect students with special needs.
	Intrinsic values	A3. I believe it is important to focus on cultivating the personal abilities of students with special needs. A4. I support inclusive education.
	Emotional belonging	A5. I feel encouraged when I hear or see words that praise the profession of resource teachers.
professional identity recognition	Professional roles	B1. I believe that resource teachers are an important part of the teacher community.
	Career aspirations	B2. I actively take on teaching tasks for students with special needs. B3. I actively build harmonious relationships with colleagues.
	Sense of professional belonging	B4. When introducing myself, I am happy to mention that I am a resource teacher.
specialized identity recognition	Teaching competence	C1. I can seriously complete classroom teaching tasks, including those involving students with special needs. C2. I have good ability to manage students (including those with special needs). C3. I am able to maintain good relationships with students with special needs. C4. I design individualized education plans based on the personality characteristics of students with special needs.
	Instructional design	C5. I can encourage students in my class to treat students with special needs appropriately. C6. In the classroom, I am able to pay attention to the specific needs of students with special needs.
	Specialized skills in special education	C7. I believe resource teachers have many unique traits and professional abilities that distinguish them from general education teachers. C8. I possess strong skills to teach in special education.
	Teaching practice	C9. Teaching methods are very important for the learning of students with special needs.
	Work conditions	D1. I am satisfied with the office conditions currently provided by the school.
situational identity recognition	Compensation	D2. Compared with the effort and energy I put in, I am satisfied with my current salary and benefits.
	Perception of work pressure	D3. My daily work makes me feel at ease.

5. Research Findings

5.1. The Gender Imbalance and Narrow Development Paths in the Titles and Positions of Resource Teachers

The survey results highlight four key findings. First, there is a marked gender imbalance, with 95% of respondents being women, which points to structural challenges and societal biases that discourage men from entering the field. Second, the sample is characterized by a high proportion (95%) of teachers with bachelor's degrees and 55% aged 30 - 39, indicating promising potential for professional development. Third, despite this potential, the degree of education and age suggests limited strategies for developing talent. Fourth, the distribution of professional titles—55% intermediate, 42.5% junior, and no senior—reveals restricted career advancement opportunities for resource teachers.

5.2. The Resource Teachers Have a Sense of Professional Belonging as Well as a High Identity Level

The overall mean of this scale is $M = 4.56$, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.48. The overall mean is greater than 4, indicating that the overall identity of resource teachers in this area is relatively high. This illustrates that resource teachers feel a sense of purpose, belonging, and security, and identify themselves as resource teachers, which gives them a sense of self-respect and confidence within the school and social settings and also makes them more willing and capable of engaging in education. From one perspective, there have been national regulations such as “The Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities” and “The Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education during the 14th Five-Year Plan” which have made it clear to ordinary schools that they should hire resource teachers and specify their duties. From another perspective, inclusive education has improved resource teachers' professional attitudes.

5.3. Resource Teachers Face Heavy Workloads, and Their Sense of Identity and Status Needs to Be Enhanced

Based on the analysis of the four aspects above, it was found that the situational identity dimension had a mean (M) of 4.25 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.70, which is lower than the overall average identity mean ($M = 4.56$). This suggests that the situational identity of resource teachers needs improvement. Concerning question “My daily work makes me feel at ease”, there were 7.5% of the teachers having a very disagree attitude and 7.5% holding a disagree attitude; this reflects that there is too much work for resource teachers to deal with, and resource teachers are burdened with different tasks, so nearly half of them think that it is not an easy job to complete their daily work. 45% of the resource teachers are being taught by another subject teacher. That means the majority of resource teachers, in addition to educating special children, are also teaching other subjects. Accordingly, this aspect of resource teachers also involves responsibility for handling the entire class. Besides these responsibilities, there is also the administrative respon-

sibility. In addition to the above responsibilities, the work of resource teachers also entails the psychological burden that comes with it. For subject teachers who are also resource teachers, their identity as subject teachers may be weakened by the reduced status of subjects. At the same time, due to the lack of job positions and support for resource teachers in general, it is difficult to establish a new identity for them [14]. Moreover, the question “Compared with the effort and energy I put in, I am satisfied with my current salary and benefits” indicates that some resource teachers are dissatisfied with their salaries. They think their effort does not match the salary offered. The issue may be rooted at the institutional level. Although the status of resource teachers has been well established through various laws and regulations, they still constitute a new category of teachers. At present, China has yet to incorporate resource teachers into school administrative management, and teacher supervision generally lacks standardized criteria.

5.4. There Are Low Levels of Confidence in Special Education, and Competence Should Be Improved

17.5% of the resource teachers have no experience with special education training. Also, 45% of resource teachers are part-time teachers in other subject areas, not as full-time resource teachers. In addition, some teachers (25% and 20%) share the attitude of having a general belief about “managing the special students” and “having good skills in conducting special education.” It appears that the resource teachers in this country do not receive any special education training and are not confident in their abilities, suggesting a need to improve their special education professional skills. First, the reasons for this are two: firstly, because the county has failed to implement any systematic training system for special education and it lacks funding to train teachers on the subject matter, therefore it cannot conduct any relevant courses; secondly, the schools have not made teaching of the subject a special job and have not incorporated special education training into teachers’ individual development plans, instead they just assign the teacher to teach some particular subject, and of course this affects the performance of teachers. There is also no adequate number of special education resource teachers or resources locally available for teachers to learn to teach.

6. Suggestions

6.1. Establish Professional Standards and Enhance the Working Environment

Establishing clear and specific professional standards for inclusive education teachers is essential to avoid role ambiguity and job overlap among resource teachers, itinerant guidance teachers, and other professionals involved in inclusive education. To support this, schools should develop internal communication and coordination mechanisms, accurately define job responsibilities, work objectives, tasks, and accountability for resource teachers, and set measurable work goals. Joint meetings should be held with school staff to assign responsibilities clearly

and reduce unnecessary pressure on other members. Additionally, schools need to arrange resource classrooms, ordinary classrooms, and related technical equipment according to actual conditions, ensuring resource teachers have dedicated time and space to fulfill their duties.

6.2. Improve the Staffing System and Improve Welfare Benefits

The inconsistency between the nature of the job and compensation can significantly impact the efficiency and enthusiasm of resource teachers. To address this, the administrative department of education and ordinary schools should provide specific support in four areas: improved staffing, appropriate allowances, recognition through professional titles, and adjusted personnel allocation for resource teachers. There is also a need for tailored employment systems, clear employment plans, and evaluation criteria to promote job-specific professional development. Lastly, a standardized salary system should reflect both the workload and the specialized skills required for resource teaching.

6.3. Improve Professional Development and Carry Out Itinerant Guidance

In June 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Implementation of Inclusive Education for Disabled Children and Teenagers in Compulsory Education.” The document emphasized the critical role of resource teachers’ expertise. It stated, “resource teachers for children and teenagers with disabilities should be outstanding educators who are either graduates of special education programs or have been certified after completing specialized training administered by provincial education authorities and possess significant experience in special education and rehabilitation. [15]” Survey findings indicate that resource teachers at the county level lack formal training in special education. Therefore, enhancing their professional development is essential. Regular academic events, such as seminars and lectures, could allow resource teachers to exchange ideas with peers from other schools and partner with university departments specializing in integrated education. Additionally, implementing a mentoring program to support each resource teacher individually should be considered.

6.4. Enhance Promotion Regarding the Concept of Inclusive Education and Develop a Collaboration Mechanism between Families, Schools, and Communities

According to the questionnaire results, resource teachers have a strong identification with their profession and organization. They feel proud to be known as resource teachers by society, implying that support from the entire society helps improve their identification. The self-identity of resource teachers is formed by social surroundings and interpersonal interactions. Transitioning to the school perspective, school administration and general teachers should eliminate the notion that “resource teachers are special education teachers” and foster a support philosophy in the school. It is important to stress that resource teachers are part-

ners on the teaching team and may make contributions that improve teaching performance. Looking from the parents' standpoint, their awareness of the value of inclusive education is heightened by parent-teacher schools, themed class meetings, school cultural activities, and peer support programs for students. These efforts help reduce misunderstandings or exclusion of children with special needs and help parents learn about the role of resource teachers in supporting all children. Furthermore, from the perspective of the community, it is important to heighten the promotion of inclusive education concepts. The entire community should develop an understanding and support for inclusive education [16]. This could be done through media publicity, community welfare events, public days, and other similar activities to build up an inclusive culture.

7. Research Limitations

This study focuses on resource teachers from one county in Zhejiang Province. Due to regional differences in economic development, educational resources, and policy implementation, the findings have limited external validity and cannot be generalized to areas with differing development levels.

This study collected 40 valid questionnaires, reflecting the actual number of resource teachers in the county. Statistically, the small sample size may limit the analysis of inter-group demographic differences and reduce the stability of conclusions.

This study employs questionnaires within a cross-sectional quantitative design. While suitable for capturing group trends, this method does not examine dynamic processes, intrinsic mechanisms, or situational factors influencing resource teacher identity. For example, it cannot fully reveal the emergence of identity conflicts in daily work or how teachers construct identity through interaction.

8. Suggestions for Future Development

It is recommended that future research expand the scope of investigation to include representative samples from multiple counties and cities within Zhejiang Province, and even across different regions of the country, to compare the commonalities and differences in resource teachers' identity recognition under different policy environments, economic conditions, and educational resources. At the same time, consideration can be given to including related groups, such as special education school teachers and itinerant guidance teachers, in the comparative analysis to further clarify the unique identity characteristics of resource teachers.

Based on quantitative surveys, it is recommended to introduce qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and case analyses, to delve into the identity construction process of resource teachers in specific work scenarios, the daily dilemmas they face, and their coping strategies. A mixed-method design helps establish meaningful connections between group trends and individual experiences, enhancing the depth and explanatory power of research conclusions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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