

Article

Paths to Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Bridging the Reported Curriculum–Teacher Practice Gap in Türkiye and China

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Abstract

This study examines inclusive early childhood education in China and Türkiye through a comparative qualitative analysis of policy, curriculum, and teacher perspectives. A two-stage research design was employed, combining document analysis of national early childhood education curricula with structured individual interviews involving 60 (30 from each country) early childhood teachers. Content analysis of data explored conceptualizations of inclusion, implementation practices, perceived barriers, and contextual influences. Findings reveal contrasting patterns in the relationship between policy and teacher-reported practices. Türkiye demonstrates more explicit curricular commitment to inclusion, with extensive references to diversity, participation, and individualized support. However, teachers frequently reported challenges in implementing these principles due to limitations in professional preparation, institutional support, and available resources. In contrast, Chinese curriculum documents contain fewer explicit references to inclusion; teachers described more pragmatic and contextually responsive implementation practices that facilitate the participation of children with diverse needs. Across both countries, cultural values, teacher agency, and school-level conditions emerged as significant factors influencing inclusive practice. The findings indicate that the policy–teacher-reported practice gap remains a central challenge in both contexts. The study argues that effective inclusion depends not only on policy commitments but also on the capacity of educators and institutions to translate policy into practice.

Keywords: inclusive education; early childhood; curriculum comparison; inclusion



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1. Introduction

Early childhood education is widely recognized as a critical period for fostering children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as for establishing the foundations of equitable learning opportunities. In recent decades, inclusivity encompassing equity, diversity, accessibility, and participation has become a central priority in global education discourse ([UNESCO, 2021](#); [UNICEF China, 2017](#)). Inclusive preschool curricula are expected to address the diverse needs of children by recognizing differences related to culture, language, gender, socioeconomic background, and ability. However, inclusivity is not a neutral or universally agreed-upon concept; it is shaped by sociocultural contexts, political ideologies, and dominant educational discourses ([Ainscow, 2020](#); [Ball, 2015](#)). While global frameworks such as SDG 4 advocate for inclusive and equitable quality

education, the interpretation and implementation of inclusivity vary significantly across national contexts.

In Türkiye, the recent literature has highlighted both progress and persistent challenges in inclusive early childhood education. [Diken et al. \(2025\)](#) trace the historical roots and current pathways of inclusive preschool education, identifying gaps in legislation, teacher preparation, and resource allocation. UNICEF China Inclusive Early Childhood Education Initiative ([UNICEF China, 2025](#)) reports that while reforms have expanded access, inclusivity remains unevenly implemented, particularly for children with disabilities and refugees. [Akkaya et al. \(2026\)](#) further demonstrate how disability and refugee status intersect to constrain equitable preschool participation, underscoring systemic fragmentation and limited curriculum responsiveness. These studies suggest that inclusivity is a policy priority, but curriculum-level analyses remain scarce and fragmented, with limited attention to how inclusivity is embedded in preschool programs.

In China, inclusivity has gained momentum through major reforms. The Preschool Education Law ([Ministry of Education, 2001](#)) expanded inclusive resources, yet challenges persist in terms of unequal distribution, weak teacher capacity, and insufficient support for diverse groups ([UNICEF China, 2025](#)). UNICEF-China's disability-inclusive education program (2025) reached over one million children, but teachers continue to report difficulties in adapting curricula to diverse needs. The recent literature emphasizes structural integration of curriculum and teacher development, yet inclusivity is often narrowly interpreted as disability integration rather than broader diversity dimensions such as language, culture, and socioeconomic inequality ([OECD, 2023](#)).

Comparatively, the existing literature reveals two critical gaps. First, curriculum-level analyses of inclusivity in preschool education are limited in both Türkiye and China, with most studies focusing on policy rhetoric or special needs provision. Second, teacher perspectives on how inclusivity is enacted in practice remain underexplored, particularly in cross-national comparative research.

This study addresses these gaps by combining critical curriculum analysis with qualitative interviews with preschool teachers in Türkiye and China. By examining both textual representations and practitioner perceptions, it moves beyond descriptive comparison to interrogate how inclusivity is conceptualized, structured, and potentially constrained within different sociopolitical contexts. In doing so, it contributes to international debates on inclusive education by offering cross-cultural insights into how inclusivity is embedded in early childhood curricula and enacted in practice.

Based on this information, the research questions addressed in the article are:

1. How is inclusivity embedded in the official preschool curriculum documents of Türkiye and China?
2. How do preschool teachers in Türkiye and China describe the enactment of inclusive education, including the supports and barriers they experience in their educational settings?

In sum, by comparing Turkish and Chinese preschool curricula, this study aims to deepen understanding of how inclusivity is conceptualized, structured, and potentially constrained within different sociopolitical contexts, and how practitioners perceive inclusivity in both Türkiye and China. The findings are expected to contribute to both theoretical debates on inclusive education and practical efforts to design more equitable early childhood education systems. Preschool education programs in both countries are introduced in [Table 1](#) below.

Table 1. Contextual characteristics of preschool education in Türkiye and China (Ministry of National Education, 2013, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2001).

Feature	Türkiye	China
Age Level	3–5 years (optional for 3–4; compulsory for age 5 since 2024 reforms)	3–6 years (three-year kindergarten cycle: 3–4, 4–5, and 5–6)
Program Authority	Ministry of National Education (MoNE)	Ministry of Education (MOE)
Curriculum Framework	Preschool Education Program (PEP) (Ministry of National Education, 2013); holistic development focus and named Turkish Yuzyıl Maarif Model (TYMM) (Ministry of National Education, 2024), and 2 programs (PEP and TYMM) are run at the same time	Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Ministry of Education, 2001) and Preschool Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2001); balanced development across domains
Core Components	Language, cognitive, social–emotional, motor, self-care; play-based, child-centered	Health, language, society, science, art; structured routines, moral education, play-based
Inclusivity Focus	Equity for children with disabilities, refugee children, and low-income families; inclusive learning outcomes added in 2024	Disability inclusion, rural access, collective identity; supported by Education Modernization 2035 and UNICEF programs
Specific Features	Flexible daily activity blocks, family involvement, cultural diversity emphasis	Teacher–child ratio targets (1:20), structured daily routines, civic/moral education
Recent Developments (2020–2026)	Preschool access expanded to 95% of 5-year-olds; UNICEF–MoNE collaborations for refugee inclusion; teacher training in inclusive pedagogy	Expansion of public kindergartens; disability-friendly facilities; teacher professional development; regional disparities persist

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates (1) inclusive education theory, (2) critical policy and curriculum perspectives, and (3) comparative education. This combined approach enables a nuanced analysis of how inclusivity is conceptualized, represented, and operationalized in preschool curricula across different national contexts. At the core of inclusive education theory, the study draws on contemporary theories of inclusive education, which conceptualize inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners. Moving beyond narrow interpretations focused solely on disability, inclusive education emphasizes the removal of barriers to participation and learning for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities (Ainscow, 2020). Ainscow’s (2020) framework is particularly relevant, as it highlights three interconnected dimensions of inclusion: presence (access to education), participation (meaningful engagement in learning), and achievement (equitable learning outcomes). This perspective allows the study to examine whether preschool curricula go beyond access and explicitly promote meaningful participation and equity. Furthermore, Florian and Spratt (2014) argue that inclusive pedagogy requires a shift from “additional support for some” to “quality education for all,” which is essential for analyzing how inclusivity is embedded in curriculum goals and teaching approaches.

To move beyond descriptive analysis, the study is informed by critical curriculum theory, particularly the work of Ball (2015). From this perspective, curricula are not neutral documents; rather, they reflect ideological assumptions and power relations that shape what knowledge is valued and whose identities are recognized. This lens is crucial for examining

how diversity is represented or omitted, which groups are positioned as “normative” versus “other,” and how inclusion is framed (e.g., as support, deficit, or empowerment). By applying this perspective, the study interrogates not only the presence of inclusive language but also the implicit meanings and discourses underlying curriculum content.

The study also draws on critical policy analysis, which views official curriculum documents as policy texts that are socially constructed and contextually embedded (Ball, 2015). Policies are interpreted and translated within specific sociopolitical contexts, meaning that the same concept, such as inclusivity, may take different forms across countries. This perspective is particularly important for comparative research because it recognizes that curricula are shaped by broader political and cultural priorities, allows for analysis of how global ideas are adapted locally, and highlights tensions between policy rhetoric and practical implementation. Thus, inclusivity is analyzed not as a universal construct but as a context-dependent policy discourse.

Finally, the study is situated within comparative education, which provides a framework for systematically analyzing similarities and differences across national education systems. Comparative research enables the identification of both shared global trends and context-specific interpretations of inclusivity (Bray et al., 2014). In the context of Türkiye and China, this perspective is particularly valuable because it allows the study to examine how centralized education systems interpret inclusivity differently, identify culturally embedded approaches to diversity and equity, and contribute to cross-national understanding of early childhood curriculum design. By integrating these frameworks, the study conceptualizes inclusivity as a multidimensional and socially constructed concept, operationalized through explicit curriculum statements (e.g., inclusion policies, diversity goals), implicit representations (e.g., language, assumptions, and omissions), pedagogical orientations (e.g., child-centered vs. standardized approaches), and equity considerations (e.g., attention to marginalized groups). This integrative lens enables a comprehensive analysis that connects theory, policy, and curriculum practice, while also situating findings within broader global and sociocultural contexts. Positioning the study as an analysis of the relationship between curriculum discourse and teacher-reported implementation conditions further clarifies its contribution. Inclusiveness is examined not only as a policy aspiration embedded in curriculum texts but also as a lived challenge negotiated by teachers in practice. This relational framing highlights how discourse and implementation interact, converge, and diverge, thereby illuminating the reported curriculum–teacher practice gap across contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative comparative research design combining curriculum document analysis with structured interviews with preschool teachers in Türkiye and China to examine how inclusivity is conceptualized and enacted within early childhood education in both countries. Therefore, the study drew upon two complementary sources of evidence: (a) official preschool curriculum documents and (b) structured interviews with preschool teachers. By combining policy-level and practice-level data, the research sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusivity in preschool education and to explore the extent to which curriculum intentions are reflected in classroom implementation. A comparative qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic examination of similarities and differences across educational contexts while taking into account the sociocultural and policy environments in which educational practices are embedded (Bray et al., 2014). Rather than treating curricula as neutral instructional guides, the study conceptualized them as policy texts that communicate educational priorities, values, and assumptions regarding diversity and inclusion (Ball, 2015).

The research was conducted in two complementary phases. In the first phase, official preschool curriculum documents from Türkiye and China were analyzed through qualitative document analysis to identify explicit and implicit representations of inclusivity. The inclusion of two Turkish curriculum documents reflects a period of curriculum transition. The current Preschool Education Program and the Türkiye Maarif Model Preschool Education Program were analyzed separately in order to examine continuity and change in the representation of inclusion within Turkish preschool education policy. Rather than comparing equivalent numbers of curriculum documents, the study aimed to compare the officially implemented curriculum corpus available in each national context during the period of data collection.

In the second phase, structured interviews were conducted with preschool teachers to explore how inclusive principles were interpreted and implemented in everyday classroom practice. This two-stage design enabled the study to compare policy discourse with practitioners' experiences and to identify potential alignments and discrepancies between curriculum intentions and educational realities.

The integration of curriculum documents and teacher perspectives allows inclusivity to be examined across both policy and practice domains. While curriculum documents illuminate how inclusion is officially constructed and promoted, teacher interviews provide insights into how these expectations are experienced, negotiated, and enacted within educational settings. Consequently, the study moves beyond a purely descriptive curriculum comparison and offers a more nuanced understanding of inclusive education as both a policy discourse and a practical educational process.

2.1. Data Sources for Curriculum Comparison

The primary data sources of the study consist of official, nationally approved preschool curriculum documents from Türkiye and China. Two programs are running at the same time in Türkiye, including the Ministry of National Education's "Preschool Education Program" and "Türkiye Maarif Model Program", and for China, the National Early Childhood Education Guidelines/Kindergarten Curriculum Framework issued by the Ministry of Education; these were used as data sources. These documents were selected because they represent the formal and standardized frameworks guiding early childhood education in each country. Only the most recent and officially implemented versions of the programs were included to ensure relevance and comparability. Table 2 introduces the curriculum corpus included in the analysis.

Table 2. Curriculum corpus coded.

Country	Document Title	Authority	Year	Policy Status	Language	Length in Pages	Coding
China	Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)	Ministry of Education	2001	Active	Chinese	11	Yes
China	Preschool Education Law	National People's Congress	2025	Active	Chinese	25	No
Türkiye	Preschool Education Program (PEP)	Ministry of National Education	2013	Active	Turkish	114	Yes
Türkiye	Türkiye Maarif Model Preschool Education Program (TYMM)	Ministry of National Education	2024	Active	Turkish	112	Yes

The selected documents were chosen because they represented the nationally recognized curriculum frameworks guiding preschool education during the period of data collection.

2.2. Data Sources for Practice Comparison

A total of 60 preschool teachers participated in the study, including 30 teachers from Türkiye and 30 teachers from China. Participant characteristics included age, educational level, years of professional experience, class size, second-language competence, and previous training related to special education and inclusive education. Participant characteristics are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. Because participation was voluntary and recruitment occurred through professional teacher networks, detailed information regarding school location, school ownership, and regional distribution was not collected consistently across both national samples.

Table 3. Demographic information of Turkish participants interviewed.

Code	Gender	Education Level	Vocational Experience-Years	Second Language	Training on Special ed.	Training on Inclusivity	Other Education	Class Size	Age
TT1	Female	BA	6–10	No	No	Yes	Yes	16–20	20–29
TT2	Female	MA	0–5	Yes	No	No	Yes	16–20	30–39
TT3	Female	BA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	16–20	40–49
TT4	Female	BA	11–15	No	Yes	Yes	No	5–10	30–39
TT5	Female	BA	0–5	No	No	No	No	26 and above	40–49
TT6	Female	BA	21 and above	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	20–29
TT7	Male	MA	11–15	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	11–15	30–39
TT8	Female	MA	11–15	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	30–39
TT9	Female	MA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
TT10	Female	BA	0–5	Yes	No	No	No	11–15	30–39
TT11	Male	BA	16–20	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	21–25	30–39
TT12	Male	MA	11–15	No	Yes	No	Yes	26 and above	20–29
TT13	Female	BA	21 and above	No	No	No	Yes	11–15	30–39
TT14	Male	BA	11–15	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
TT15	Female	MA	21 and above	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	21–25	30–39
TT16	Female	BA	0–5	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	40–49
TT17	Male	MA	11–15	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	21–25	40–49
TT18	Female	BA	21 and above	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	21–25	20–29
TT19	Female	BA	21 and above	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	26 and above	40–49
TT20	Female	BA	0–5	No	No	Yes	No	16–20	20–29
TT21	Male	MA	0–5	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	26 and above	30–39
TT22	Male	MA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	11–15	20–29
TT23	Male	BA	21 ve üzeri	No	Yes	No	No	26 and above	30–39
TT24	Female	BA	0–5	No	No	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
TT25	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
TT26	Female	BA	0–5	No	Yes	Yes	No	11–15	20–29
TT27	Male	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	21–25	20–29
TT28	Female	BA	0–5	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
TT29	Female	MA	11–15	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	20–29
TT30	Male	MA	0–5	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	16–20	20–29

Table 4. Demographic information of Chinese participants interviewed.

Code	Gender	Education Level	Vocational Experience Year	Second Language	Training on Special ed.	Training on Inclusivity	Other Education	Class Size-n	Age
CT1	female	BA	0–5	yes	yes	yes	yes	26 and above	20–29
CT2	female	AD	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	21–25	30–39
CT3	female	AD	16–20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	26 and above	40–49
CT4	male	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	30–39
CT5	male	MA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	40–49
CT6	male	BA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT7	female	MA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5–10	30–39
CT8	female	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	30–39
CT9	female	MA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT10	female	MA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5–10	30–39
CT11	Erkek	BA	11–15	Yes	No	No	No	11–15	30–39
CT12	Erkek	BA	0–5	No	No	No	No	5–10	20–29
CT13	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	No	Yes	16–20	30–39
CT14	Erkek	BA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT15	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	30–39
CT16	Female	BA	16–20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	40–49
CT17	Female	MA	11–15	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	11–15	40–49
CT18	Erkek	BA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT19	Female	MA	11–15	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5–10	40–49
CT20	Female	BA	0–5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16–20	20–29
CT21	Female	BA	0–5	Yes	No	No	Yes	16–20	30–39
CT22	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	No	Yes	16–20	20–29
CT23	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	21–25	30–39
CT24	Female	AD	0–5	No	No	Yes	Yes	21–25	20–29
CT25	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	Yes	No	16–20	20–29
CT26	Female	AD	0–5	No	No	No	No	16–20	20–29
CT27	Female	BA	0–5	Yes	No	No	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT28	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29
CT29	Female	BA	6–10	Yes	No	No	No	5–10	20–29
CT30	Erkek	BA	6–10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11–15	20–29

2.3. Translation and Cross-Language Procedures

The researchers prepared a structured interview protocol and informed consent form in Turkish and translated them into Chinese. Translation accuracy and conceptual equivalence were reviewed by a bilingual researcher. Coding was conducted in the original languages, and quotations included in the manuscript were translated into Turkish and English by the research team and reviewed for accuracy prior to publication.

Structured interviews with 30 Turkish and 30 Chinese early childhood teachers are data sources for comparison of inclusivity practices. One of the researchers had been living and working in China before she came to Türkiye. Therefore, she was able to invite participants from both countries for interviews. Social media groups for preschool teachers were used for the invitations and interviews, and applied to all volunteer participants. No focus group discussion took place. In Türkiye, data were gathered through direct, face-to-face interviews, while in China, the process relied on participants completing structured

interview forms. Institutional review board approval was also obtained from the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University Board of “Scientific Research and Publication Ethics”. Turkish and Chinese participants are introduced in Tables 3 and 4 below. Interviews were conducted in Turkish and Chinese.

2.4. Data Analysis

The study uses qualitative content analysis combined with a critical discourse-informed approach to examine the representation of inclusivity. The analysis is guided by the study’s theoretical framework, particularly inclusive education dimensions: presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow, 2020). Key dimensions of inclusivity identified in the literature are diversity (cultural, linguistic, and gender), equity and access, special educational needs and disability, socioeconomic inclusion, representation, and identity. These dimensions were operationalized into analytic categories to systematically code the curriculum documents, and findings are presented under teacher, program, child, and school–environment relations dimensions. At the teacher level, inclusivity was coded in terms of pedagogical practices, professional knowledge, and attitudes, such as teachers’ recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity, equitable participation strategies, and individualized support for children with disabilities or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. At the child level, inclusivity was operationalized through indicators of children’s participation, identity development, and equitable access to learning opportunities. This included the extent to which curricula and practices enabled children to express diverse identities, engage in inclusive activities, and experience belonging regardless of socioeconomic status or ability. At the program level, inclusivity was assessed through curriculum content, policy guidelines, and structural provisions. Coding focused on whether curricula explicitly represented diversity, incorporated inclusive learning outcomes, and provided frameworks for addressing special educational needs and socioeconomic disadvantages. Finally, at the school–environment level, inclusivity was analyzed in terms of institutional climate and community engagement. This included the presence of family support mechanisms, culturally diverse school activities, and policies that foster belonging and respect.

Although the study draws on both curriculum documents and teacher interviews, formal triangulation was not applied. The two datasets were analyzed separately and then compared to highlight convergences and divergences. This design provides valuable insights into the reported curriculum–teacher practice gap but should be interpreted as exploratory rather than fully triangulated evidence.

2.5. Coding Process of Document Analysis

The analysis followed three stages. Initial coding was performed, in which a coding scheme was developed based on the theoretical framework and research questions. Pre-determined categories, including teacher, program, child, and school and environment dimensions, were used to identify relevant content in the curriculum documents. Second, in open coding to capture context-specific meanings, an inductive approach was also employed. At last, we used comparative analysis in which findings from each country were compared. This last part was to identify similarities and differences, patterns of emphasis or omission, and distinct policy orientations. This step enabled the study to move beyond description toward interpretation. Additionally, the presence of deficit vs. strength-based perspectives added to the analysis as a critical discourse analysis element. This approach helps to uncover how inclusivity is constructed and framed, rather than simply whether it is present. A sample analysis is below.

Frequencies in Figure 1 indicate how many times the selected code was marked in the relevant case. For example, for the teacher dimension of inclusivity, both programs have

128 mentions. Therefore, this code was used with a certain frequency in both programs. Frequencies were treated as descriptive aids, and the analysis is based primarily on the interpretation of the content, location, and discursive function of the relevant passages.

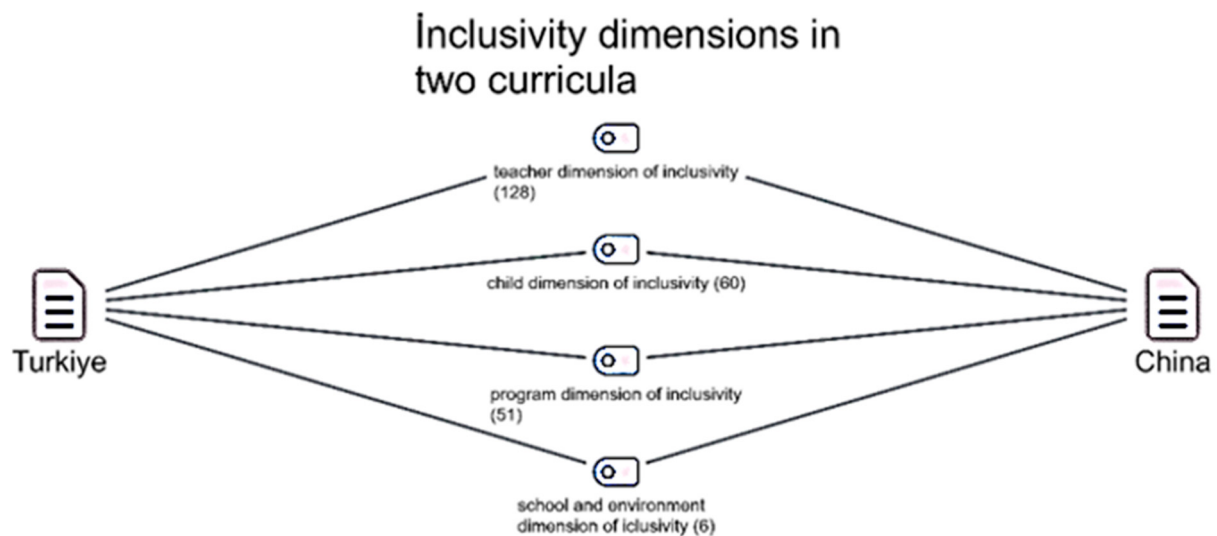


Figure 1. Inclusivity dimensions in two programs (screenshot from 2-case model analysis).

2.6. Coding Process of Structured Interviews

Teachers' interviews regarding inclusive practices in preschools were coded as explained above, and inclusivity practices in two countries were compared. A total of 30 Turkish and 30 Chinese preschool teachers' interviews were transferred to a mixed-methods analysis software (MaxQda26) and coded parallel to questions in the interview form. Interview questions are listed below, and no open-ended extra questions were allowed:

1. What do you do to help a student feel valued?
2. What are your thoughts on offering different learning activities tailored to children's developmental levels?
3. Please share your thoughts on accessible learning materials, necessary accommodations, and technological support for students with disabilities at your school.
4. What specific programs or support services are provided at your school to support students' social and emotional development?
5. What types of additional support programs or resources are provided for students learning a second language or receiving instruction in multiple languages?
6. What kinds of additional support do you think are provided to meet the individual needs of disadvantaged students?
7. Are there any professional support resources available for you and your colleagues to enhance your expertise in inclusivity? If so, what are they?
8. What can you tell us about the involvement of families and the community in the educational process?

Sample coding for interviews is presented below in Figure 2.

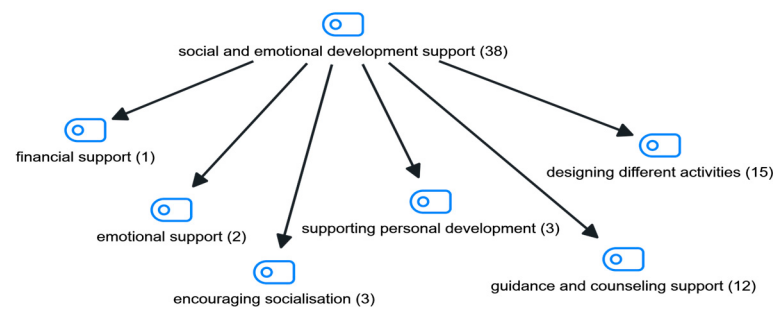


Figure 2. Sample coding map for Chinese participants' perceptions.

Two researchers coded the recorded and transcribed interviews for Turkish participants and filled forms for Chinese participants separately. Inter-coder agreement was found to be 94% for participants' perceptions and 100% for document coding. For interviews and filled forms, inter-coder agreement was calculated for *total codes: 169; agreement:159; and disagreement: 10*:

$$\text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100 = \text{inter-coder agreement (\%)} \\ 159 / (159 + 10) \times 100 = 94$$

2.7. Researcher Reflexivity

One member of the research team previously lived and worked in China, which facilitated access to participants and supported contextual interpretation of the data. To reduce potential researcher bias, coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively, and coding disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

2.8. Limitations

This study has several limitations that need acknowledgment. First, although national cultural contexts were considered to help interpret the findings, cultural explanations were not used as substitutes for systematic analysis. The conclusions are based on curriculum documents and teacher interview accounts, with cultural references serving only to provide context rather than replace empirical evidence. Second, even though data were gathered from policy texts and teacher interviews, formal triangulation was not conducted. Each dataset was analyzed separately and then compared to identify similarities and differences, offering valuable insights but limiting cross-source validation. Third, document selection and corpus non-equivalence pose challenges: curriculum texts differ in scope, format, and level of detail, which may affect comparability. The Chinese curriculum corpus consisted of the single official national preschool curriculum document currently available, whereas the Turkish corpus included multiple policy texts and curricular guidelines. This non-equivalence in document selection may affect comparability, as the Chinese case reflects one centralized text while the Turkish case draws on a broader set of sources. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution, recognizing that differences may partly stem from corpus scope rather than substantive policy divergence. Information regarding school type, urban–rural location, and regional distribution was not collected consistently across both national samples. Consequently, the study was unable to examine variations associated with specific institutional and geographical contexts. Finally, like many comparative qualitative studies, the findings are context-specific and not meant to be generalized across all early childhood settings. They instead reveal how inclusiveness is built and practiced within two centralized education systems, forming a basis for future research that might include classroom observations, longitudinal studies, or mixed-methods approaches to enhance validity.

3. Results

Research findings were interpreted in two sections: curriculum-level constructions of inclusion and teachers' perspectives on the enactment of inclusive education, including the supports and barriers they experience in their educational settings.

1. Curriculum level constructions of inclusion

To answer the first research question, "How is inclusivity embedded in the official preschool curriculum documents of Türkiye and China?", the curricula of the two countries were coded. Coding of the two countries' preschool curricula ended up with four dimensions and frequencies, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Coding scheme and frequencies for two countries.

Coding System-Dimensions of Inclusivity	Turkish PEP	Turkish TYMM	Chinese CPEG
Program	42	48	9
Teacher	69	110	17
Child	53	62	7
School–environment	5	3	1

The comparative analysis revealed substantial differences in the extent to which inclusivity was represented across the Turkish and Chinese preschool curricula. A total of 213 inclusivity-related codes were identified in the Turkish TYMM document and Turkish PEP 169, whereas only 34 codes were identified in the Chinese curriculum. The distribution of codes across dimensions further demonstrated that inclusivity was embedded more extensively and systematically within the Turkish curriculum framework than within the Chinese curriculum. Across both countries, the teacher dimension emerged as the most dominant category, accounting for 69 and 110 codes in Türkiye and 17 codes in China. The child dimension represented the second most prominent category, followed by the program dimension, whereas the school and environment dimension received the least attention in both curriculum systems. This pattern suggests that inclusion is predominantly conceptualized as a pedagogical process centered on teachers and children rather than as a broader institutional and ecological responsibility.

The comparative distribution also highlights important differences in emphasis. While both curricula acknowledge inclusive principles, the Turkish curriculum demonstrates a substantially more explicit commitment to inclusivity across all dimensions. By contrast, the Chinese curriculum appears to adopt a more selective approach, focusing primarily on pedagogical adaptations while providing comparatively limited attention to broader programmatic and environmental aspects of inclusion. These findings may also indicate that inclusive language is more visible or explicit in the selected Turkish programs. Building on this overall pattern, the following sections examine each inclusivity dimension in greater detail.

3.1. Teacher Dimension

An analysis of the "China Preschool Education Guide" regarding the role of teachers in the context of inclusivity revealed that the greatest emphasis was placed on teachers tailoring their approaches to children's individual circumstances and ensuring equal opportunities; in contrast, the guide made little mention of the use of diverse methods and techniques, collaboration among stakeholders, or professional development.

Regarding the code related to tailoring activities to individual circumstances by taking into account each student's characteristics, interests, disadvantages, and learning style, the

following quote from the guide is an example. Quotes are identified with the program name and page number:

“In art activities, for all children, ensure the aesthetic development and nurturing of each child according to their distinct characteristics and needs” (CPEG, 6).

Regarding the code on adaptation to individual differences in organizing learning activities based on children’s distinct characteristics, the following quote is an example:

“We must respect children’s individual differences such as their developmental levels, abilities, experiences, and learning styles provide instruction appropriate for each child, and strive to ensure that every child achieves satisfaction and success” (CPEG, 9).

In the teacher dimension, the China CPEG Program predominantly emphasized adaptation to individual circumstances. This finding reflects a flexible pedagogical orientation in which teachers are expected to recognize and respond to children’s individual needs, interests, and developmental differences. Moreover, codes related to the use of diverse instructional strategies, inter-stakeholder collaboration, and professional development were highly visible in the Chinese curriculum. The following are example quotes of this:

“Children should be helped to become familiar with, understand, and speak Mandarin Chinese by providing a Mandarin Chinese-language environment. In regions with ethnic minorities, children should also be supported in learning their own native languages” (CPEG, 3).

The principle of ensuring equal opportunities for children regardless of religion, language, race, or socioeconomic status is sampled with the following quote:

“Every child should be given the opportunity to express their unique qualities and achieve success, and their self-confidence and self-esteem should be strengthened” (CPEG, 4).

Such findings align with the inclusive education literature arguing that teacher flexibility, collaborative inquiry, and differentiated teaching practices constitute essential pre-conditions for equitable learning environments. Chinese scholarship similarly emphasizes teachers’ inclusive education literacy and adaptive pedagogical competence as key components of quality inclusive practice (Song et al., 2025), consistent with international research highlighting teacher responsiveness and pedagogical flexibility as central elements of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020; OECD, 2023).

When the concept of “teacher” in Türkiye’s PEP and TYMM was evaluated from the perspective of inclusivity, it was determined that the most frequently used codes were “tailored to individual differences,” “equal opportunity,” and “materials and environments adapted to differences.”

This is a similar result to CPEG. Similar to each other, PEP and TYMM strongly foregrounded adaptation to individual circumstances, positioning responsiveness to diversity at the core of teachers’ practice. However, professional development and inter-stakeholder cooperation appeared less frequently coded. This finding may suggest that the TYMM curriculum prioritizes direct pedagogical responsiveness to children’s unique profiles and learning trajectories over institutional dimensions of inclusion. The following excerpts from programs are examples:

“Teachers should be sensitive to each child’s individual needs, based on developmentally appropriate practices, and should provide experiences that ensure every child achieves the learning outcomes and indicators specified in the preschool education program; they should also make the necessary adjustments to enhance these experiences” (PEP, 161).

“Learning content can be simplified or diversified by tailoring it to children’s characteristics. Children can be supported during the learning process by providing them with the different types of cues and assistance they need. Children’s participation in activities can be encouraged by providing various types of feedback” (TYMM, 145).

Such an approach is consistent with universal design and child-centered inclusion frameworks emphasizing individualized support mechanisms and flexible instructional adaptations for all learners.

3.2. Program Dimension

In terms of the program dimension, all three curricula strongly emphasized adaptation to individual differences, indicating a shared recognition that inclusive education requires flexibility in curriculum implementation. UNESCO identifies responsiveness to learner diversity as one of the foundational principles of inclusive early childhood education and highlights the necessity of adapting educational experiences to each child’s developmental pathway. Therefore, the prominence of this code across all programs reflects alignment with international inclusion frameworks. The following quotes are examples of this:

“Early childhood education content should be comprehensive and stimulating; it can be structured around five core areas: health, language, social skills, science, and the arts. These areas should interact with one another to support children’s emotions, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and abilities from various perspectives” (CPEG, 1).

“The learning abilities and needs of children in a classroom vary, but the educational process is expected to meet the needs of all children. It is understood that holistic development will take place in an educational environment guided by an inclusive perspective that takes into account the unique characteristics of all children” (PEP, 14).

“Educational environments and processes should meet children’s needs and be tailored to their individual differences” (TYMM, 8).

Nevertheless, important distinctions emerged regarding support services and assessment approaches. In both the China CPEG Program and the current Turkish PEP, guidance and counseling services were among the least frequently emphasized elements.

This finding may indicate that psychosocial support structures remain insufficiently integrated into curricular frameworks, despite evidence suggesting that inclusive education requires coordinated emotional, developmental, and social support systems.

Conversely, the TYMM Preschool Education Program addressed inclusivity through the simultaneous integration of individualized programming, guidance services, and multidimensional assessment. For multidimensional assessment, the following quote from the program may be cited as an example:

“Assessment in early childhood education is a multidimensional process. Assessment in early childhood education is approached from three dimensions: assessment of children, assessment of the program, and assessment of teachers” (TYMM, 136).

The inclusion of multidimensional assessment is particularly notable because it reflects a departure from narrow developmental or academic evaluation models toward a more comprehensive understanding of children’s competencies and needs. The literature emphasizes that inclusive assessment practices should recognize children’s cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral diversity while avoiding exclusionary standardization

processes. In this respect, the TYMM curriculum appears to embody a more contemporary and evidence-based perspective on inclusive curriculum design.

3.3. Child Dimension

The findings regarding the child dimension further illuminated differences in the conceptualization of inclusion. In the China CPEG Program, the most prominent codes were children's ability to express themselves through multiple means and the acquisition of fundamental inclusive values. The following excerpts from CPEG explain this:

"[one of the purposes of CPEG] ...to provide children with opportunities to express themselves freely; to encourage them to boldly express their emotions, understanding, and imagination through various art forms; to respect every child's ideas and creativity; to appreciate their unique aesthetic sensibilities and forms of expression; and to share in the joy they create" (CPEG, 6).

"Children should be introduced, in an age-appropriate manner, to the country's ethnic minorities, other countries around the world, and different ethnic groups. They should be taught to understand and respect cultural diversity and differences, and to treat everyone equally" (CPEG, 4).

These findings indicate a participatory and expression-oriented understanding of childhood, emphasizing diversity in communication and active engagement in learning processes. Research in inclusive early childhood education demonstrates that opportunities for multimodal participation and self-expression strengthen children's social integration, agency, and academic engagement. However, the comparatively limited reference to fairness within the Chinese curriculum may suggest that inclusion is framed more through participation than equity discourse. Similarly, the current Turkish Preschool Education Program prominently emphasized inclusive values. However, the notion of children "feeling valued" was comparatively underrepresented. The following quote is representative of feeling valued:

"Opportunities should be created in every social setting where children find themselves so that they can realize they are unique and one-of-a-kind, feel that they are valued members of their family, extended family, peer group, class, school, and country, and demonstrate this not only through words but also through their behavior" (PEP, 68).

This finding is important because emotional belonging, recognition, and psychological safety are increasingly considered essential components of inclusive pedagogy. Thus, although the Turkish PEP promotes inclusive norms conceptually, it may engage less explicitly with children's emotional experiences within inclusive settings. The TYMM Program similarly emphasized children's sense of being valued alongside inclusive values, as stated in the following quote:

"He/she realizes that he/she, too, is valuable, just like everyone else" (TYMM, 329).

Current scholarship argues that children's feelings of acceptance, emotional security, and visibility within educational environments are central indicators of authentic inclusion. Furthermore, positive self-evaluation and a sense of self-worth have been associated with children's psychological well-being, social adjustment, and developmental outcomes (Hosogi et al., 2012). Therefore, the two countries' curricula appear to comprehensively integrate both structural and affective dimensions of inclusion.

3.4. School and Environment Dimension

In the school and environment dimension, the China CPEG Program most strongly emphasized family and community collaboration, as cited in the following quote:

“Preschool institutions should collaborate with families and the community; in conjunction with elementary schools, they should make comprehensive use of all types of educational resources and create conditions conducive to children’s development” (CPEG, 1).

This strong emphasis on family and community cooperation observed in the Chinese curriculum may be understood within broader national efforts to promote equitable educational opportunities through shared social responsibility and community engagement (UNICEF China, 2017).

This finding reflects an ecological understanding of inclusion in which educational responsibility is shared among schools, families, and society. The literature consistently identifies reciprocal family–school partnerships and community engagement as critical mechanisms for promoting inclusive participation and equitable developmental outcomes in early childhood education. Nevertheless, individualized arrangements regarding physical environments, instructional materials, and learning tools appeared comparatively less emphasized.

A similar tendency was evident in the current Turkish PEP and TYMM, where family–community cooperation and guidance services were foregrounded, whereas accessibility-related adjustments concerning materials and physical environments received relatively limited attention. The following excerpts are samples of this:

“In early childhood education institutions that do not have a guidance counselor, the development of the guidance program and the activities to be carried out in accordance with this program are conducted under the guidance and coordination of the Guidance Research Centers (RAM) to which the institution is affiliated” (PEP, 21).

“Priority should be given to children who are identified as having changes in their behavior at home or at school, as well as to children with special needs” (TYMM, 121).

“Importance should be placed on guidance and psychological counseling services in early childhood education programs” (TYMM, 11).

Taken together, these excerpts illustrate that both the Chinese CPEG and the Turkish PEP/TYMM curricula foreground family–community cooperation and guidance services as central mechanisms of inclusion. However, across contexts, accessibility-related adjustments to materials and physical environments receive comparatively less emphasis. This pattern suggests that while policy texts strongly valorize collaboration and psychosocial support, they provide limited operational detail on how inclusive participation can be facilitated through concrete environmental and material adaptations.

3.5. Deficit-Oriented Versus Strength-Based Perspectives

The analysis also revealed substantial differences regarding deficit-oriented and strength-based representations of children. In the China CPEG Program, children were predominantly positioned as active participants capable of expressing themselves through multiple modes. This reflects a partially strength-based orientation emphasizing children’s competencies and participatory capacities. Similarly, the TYMM strongly reflected a strength-based discourse by foregrounding children’s feelings of value, diverse developmental pathways, and individualized learning opportunities. The emphasis on multidimensional assessment particularly reinforced the idea that children’s abilities should be understood holistically rather than evaluated according to standardized norms. Research consistently identifies strength-based approaches as essential for authentic inclusion because they recognize children’s competencies, agency, and potential rather than focusing

solely on limitations or deficits. By comparison, although the current Turkish PEP incorporated inclusive values, portions of the discourse remained relatively intervention-oriented and professionally mediated. Inclusion was often framed through the teacher's role in supporting developmental adequacy and educational adaptation, which may implicitly position differences as conditions requiring management rather than as sources of diversity and strength.

2. Teachers' Perspectives on the Implementation of Inclusion

To answer the second research question, "How do preschool teachers in Türkiye and China describe the enactment of inclusive education, including the supports and barriers they experience in their educational settings?", all interviews were open-coded, and the perspectives of 30 Turkish and 30 Chinese preschool teachers provided important insights into how inclusivity is enacted in practice. Coding of interviews ended up with four themes and four sub-themes, as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. Themes and sub-themes for interview analysis.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Helping students feel valued	
Inclusive support and accommodations	Meeting the individual needs of disadvantaged children Offering a variety of learning activities Support for social and emotional development Support for different languages
Inclusive education support for teachers	
Collaboration with families and the community	

A comparison of the curriculum findings and teachers' experiences revealed an interesting policy–practice dynamic across the two countries. Despite the stronger representation of inclusivity within Turkish curriculum documents, Turkish teachers frequently reported challenges related to implementation. The following excerpts from Turkish participants' interviews sample these challenges. The excerpt symbolized as TT2 means the second Turkish teacher participated in this research:

"...I think we have shortcomings, especially when it comes to special education or psychological support. Classes are too crowded" (TT2).

"...Every student needs an individualized approach, but resources are limited" (TT26).

"Sometimes teachers help on their own initiative. It seems like there's no formal support system in place" (TT30).

"There aren't many people other than teachers who provide support in this area. Schools do not provide the necessary physical facilities for disadvantaged students" (TT5).

These challenges included insufficient resources, crowded classrooms, limited specialist support, inadequate physical conditions, and difficulties in responding to diverse learner needs. Consequently, teachers described a discrepancy between policy expectations and classroom realities. In contrast, Chinese teachers reported fewer implementation barriers and generally described inclusive practices as more manageable within their educational

settings. The following excerpts sample Chinese participants' positive perceptions of inclusivity (CT means Chinese teacher):

"The school has implemented some strategic plans for disadvantaged students and made certain updates to provide them with a better educational environment" (CT4).

"We will never give up on disadvantaged students. In addition to giving them our utmost attention, we provide regular psychological counseling services. . ." (CT8).

"First and foremost, we provide strong reassurance to disadvantaged children; in addition to offering emotional support, we also work to meet their financial needs by communicating with their families" (CT9).

Additionally, they mentioned some barriers and excerpts related to these barriers as follows:

"We're having a hard time collaborating with families and the community" (CT28).

"I don't think our school provides much support of this kind [inclusive support]. In my opinion, this kind of support is inseparable from hands-on activities. Realistically, we need to develop solutions tailored to local conditions" (CT19).

Although the Chinese curriculum contained fewer explicit references to inclusivity, teachers perceived fewer obstacles regarding the practical enactment of inclusive principles.

At the curriculum level, the Turkish preschool programs demonstrated a substantially stronger and more explicit emphasis on inclusivity than the Chinese curriculum. As illustrated by the code distribution, inclusivity-related references were considerably more frequent in the Turkish curriculum documents, particularly within the teacher, child, and program dimensions. This finding suggests that inclusivity occupies a more visible position within Turkish early childhood education policy discourse. However, teachers' accounts revealed a more complex picture. Despite the extensive representation of inclusive principles in Turkish curriculum documents, Turkish teachers frequently reported difficulties in implementing these principles in everyday classroom practice. Commonly reported challenges included insufficient physical conditions, crowded classrooms, inadequate materials, limited specialist support, time constraints, and difficulties in addressing the diverse needs of all children simultaneously. These findings suggest the existence of a gap between policy intentions and implementation realities, whereby inclusive aspirations outlined in curriculum documents are not always supported by adequate institutional and structural conditions.

In contrast, participant Chinese teachers generally reported fewer implementation-related difficulties. Although inclusivity was represented less extensively in the Chinese curriculum documents, participant teachers tended to describe classroom practices as functioning relatively smoothly. Almost all participants indicated that they were able to respond to children's needs within existing educational structures and reported fewer barriers related to resources, classroom organization, or institutional support. These findings suggest a closer alignment between curriculum expectations and classroom implementation. Comparison of curriculum discourses and teacher-reported implementation experiences was combined and presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Comparison of curriculum discourses and teacher-reported implementation experiences.

Inc.Dimension	Curriculum Findings	Teacher-Reported Findings	Convergence/Divergence	Alternative Interpretation	Implication
Teacher Role	All curricula position teachers as key agents of inclusion. Teacher-related codes were the most frequent category in all documents.	Teachers in both countries described themselves as primarily responsible for responding to learner diversity.	Convergence	Teacher-centered discourse may reflect policy expectations rather than actual institutional support.	Inclusion is primarily teacher-centered.
Individualized Support	All curricula emphasized adaptation to individual differences. This emphasis was particularly visible in TYMM.	Teachers in both countries reported adapting activities according to children's needs; Turkish teachers more frequently reported implementation constraints.	Partial divergence	Differences may reflect resource availability rather than curricular intentions alone.	Policy expectations exceed available support.
Professional Support	Professional development was less visible in CPEG and PEP and more visible in TYMM.	Turkish teachers frequently described professional development as insufficient and overly theoretical. Chinese teachers reported more available support.	Divergence	Perceptions may be influenced by local professional development opportunities rather than curriculum content.	Teacher preparation remains uneven.
Family–Community Collaboration	Family and community cooperation was emphasized in all curricula, particularly CPEG.	Turkish participants more frequently reported limited family and community engagement. Chinese participants reported higher levels of cooperation.	Partial divergence	Differences may reflect local community contexts and school characteristics.	Family engagement may be context-dependent.
Accessibility and Resources	Limited references to environmental adaptations in CPEG and PEP; stronger emphasis in TYMM.	Turkish teachers frequently reported inadequate materials and infrastructure; Chinese participants reported fewer barriers.	Divergence	Findings reflect teacher-reported conditions rather than observed practice.	Accessibility requires stronger structural support.

Based on themes introduced in Table 6, participants' perceptions of inclusivity are compared in Table 8 with the excerpts from interviews.

The comparison, therefore, reveals an apparent paradox. While Turkish curriculum documents articulate a broader and more comprehensive vision of inclusion, teachers report greater implementation challenges. Conversely, although the Chinese curriculum contains fewer explicit inclusivity-related references, teachers describe fewer practical obstacles in implementing inclusive practices. This finding indicates that the effectiveness of inclusive education cannot be assessed solely through the content of curriculum documents. Rather, successful inclusion appears to depend on the interaction between policy frameworks and the contextual conditions that support their enactment, including resources, institutional capacity, professional support systems, and classroom organization. From a comparative perspective, the Turkish case may be characterized as a policy-rich but implementation-challenged model of inclusion, whereas the Chinese case appears to reflect a more moderate policy discourse accompanied by comparatively smoother implementation experiences. These findings highlight the importance of examining inclusivity not only as a curriculum principle but also as a practical and organizational process shaped by the realities of educational contexts.

Table 8. Analysis of interviews by theme.

Theme	Turkish P.	Chinese P.	Comparison
Helping students feel valued	“...I always make sure to recognize and appreciate their achievements, no matter how small...” (TT13). “I try to create a warm and supportive environment in the classroom so that every child feels special and valued...” (TT15).	“I acknowledge the child’s efforts and progress in a timely manner, and I make sure the child knows that their efforts are noticed and appreciated by others.” (CT 2). “I encourage the child and make sure they participate in activities” (CT11).	Similar efforts reported.
Inclusive support and accommodations -Meeting the individual needs of disadvantaged children. -Offering a variety of learning activities -Support for social and emotional development. -Support for different languages.	“...The height of restroom sinks can be lowered, cabinets can be adjusted to fit students’ heights, and ramps can be installed for students with physical disabilities” (TT6). “There are some supports, but are they enough? No. I wish there were more materials and some guidance to help teachers...” (TT24).	“...Thanks to the learning materials and technological support provided by the school, children with disabilities have had the opportunity to grow up in a more enriching environment.” (CT1). “It provides assistive equipment and materials for disadvantaged children. For example, magnifiers and hearing aids” (CT3).	Chinese participants reported more inclusive support and accommodation.
Inclusive education support for teachers	“We receive some in-service training, but it generally remains theoretical. There should be more hands-on training. More work needs to be done on how to apply these concepts in a real classroom setting” (TT11). “In-service training is provided from time to time, but the number and content of these sessions are insufficient. There is a need for more hands-on and regular training” (TT19).	“The teacher resource pool is being strengthened; the Ministry of National Education regularly sends experienced teachers to conduct model lessons and provide training for disadvantaged groups. Online and in-person training sessions are organized for teachers. The content covers up-to-date teaching methods, activity planning, and guidance for children” (CT23). “Sometimes we attend training sessions; most of the time, we make adjustments among teachers based on the students’ circumstances” (CT20).	Turkish participants underline the lack of hands-on experiences.
Collaboration with families and the community	“There’s almost no community support either. Everyone needs to do their part” (TT30). “We don’t see much support from the community either; I think they need to be more active” (TT26).	“Families actively participate in the parent-teacher meetings and parent-child activities organized by the school, and they closely monitor their children’s development by providing support at home that aligns with the school’s educational process...” (CT29). “Families volunteer to participate in certain activities, holiday celebrations, and sports festivals” (CT3).	Turkish participants report a lack of family and community collaboration with schools.

4. Discussion

Building on these findings, the strategic comparison of preschool curricula in China and Türkiye serves as a critical heuristic for evaluating how disparate national priorities and ideological frameworks shape the ‘intended versus implemented’ curriculum. Beyond descriptive alignment, this analysis interrogates how educational policy instruments reflect and reproduce broader societal values. By situating this discussion within the global mandates of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we can move beyond the superficial rhetoric of inclusion to assess whether national systems are truly fostering equitable participation or merely facilitating physical placement. This evaluation highlights the persistently reported “policy–teacher practice gap,” where the theoretical commitment to inclusion often flounders against the realities of classroom-level pedagogical execution. The success of this transition from policy to practice pivots fundamentally on the role and preparation of the classroom educator. This finding supports Ball’s (2015) argument that educational policies are not implemented linearly but are instead interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within specific institutional contexts. Similarly, Ainscow (2020) argues that efforts to promote inclusion and equity frequently encounter contextual barriers that influence how policies are translated into practice. Therefore, the discrepancy observed between curriculum discourse and teachers’ implementation

experiences reflects broader international concerns regarding the gap between inclusive policy aspirations and educational realities (Ainscow, 2020; Ball, 2015).

Across all curricula, the teacher dimension received the greatest emphasis, reflecting a shared assumption that teachers are the primary agents responsible for responding to learner diversity. This finding is consistent with OECD reports highlighting that teacher competence, pedagogical flexibility, and professional judgment are central determinants of successful inclusion. However, OECD also emphasizes that inclusive systems require institutional support, adequate resources, leadership capacity, and coordinated services rather than relying solely on individual teacher efforts (Brussino, 2021; OECD, 2023). Teacher competency serves as the essential pivot point for inclusive education in both national contexts, as the educator is the primary agent tasked with navigating the tension between standardized curriculum demands and the diverse needs of the learner. While both nations identify the teacher as the nexus of inclusion, the strategic focus of their professional roles significantly differs across curricular architectures, reflecting different epistemological assumptions about what constitutes “preparedness.” Turkish emphasis on “professional preparedness” tends to frame inclusion as a state of readiness achieved through centralized training, whereas the Chinese focus on “flexible pedagogical orientation” views inclusion as a dynamic, responsive process. However, the TYMM PEP’s focus on “direct pedagogical responsiveness” represents a significant evolution, prioritizing the teacher’s immediate interaction with the child’s unique learning trajectory. While the current Turkish model seeks to empower the teacher through theoretical competence, it often misses the mark on real-world classroom inclusion by failing to provide the specific adaptation tools found in more contemporary frameworks. This professional orientation, whether flexible or competence-based, is intrinsically linked to the broader programmatic architecture and how student success is measured. The efficacy of inclusive support services is determined by the strategic flexibility of programmatic architecture. Curricula that adhere to rigid, standardized structures often fail to integrate the guidance and counseling services necessary for neurodiverse learners. In both the China CPEG and the current Turkish PEP, these psychosocial support structures remain underdeveloped, representing a shared systemic weakness. However, the TYMM aligns with the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), ensuring that support is not an “add-on” but is embedded within the core instructional design. Lastly, the language utilized in curriculum documents reflects hidden power relations and entrenched assumptions about “normality.” A critical discourse analysis of these frameworks reveals three distinct discursive constructions: the Chinese document has a discourse of “pragmatic participation” and “collective responsibility,” where inclusion is a tool for harmonizing the individual within the collective structure, whereas the current Turkish PEP has a discourse of “professional intervention” and “developmental management,” where differences are positioned as “conditions requiring management” by experts. Additionally, the TYMM has a discourse of “rights-based empowerment” and “strength-based agency,” framing the child as a holder of rights rather than a subject of remediation. The discursive distinctions identified across the curricula reflect broader developments in the international inclusion literature. Contemporary perspectives increasingly advocate moving beyond deficit-oriented models toward rights-based and strength-oriented approaches that recognize diversity as a resource rather than a problem. UNESCO’s recent early childhood inclusion framework similarly emphasizes participation, accessibility, belonging, and children’s agency as core dimensions of inclusion.

Collectively, these findings suggest that inclusive education is shaped not only by curriculum content but also by broader ideological, institutional, and contextual factors. Consistent with international research, the effectiveness of inclusive education appears to depend on the interaction between curriculum design, teacher preparedness, organizational

support, and equitable learning conditions (Ainscow, 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). The Turkish case illustrates a policy-rich but implementation-challenged model, whereas the Chinese case reflects a more moderate policy discourse accompanied by comparatively smoother implementation experiences. These findings reinforce the argument that inclusion should be evaluated not solely by the presence of inclusive language in policy documents but by the extent to which educational systems create the conditions necessary for meaningful participation, belonging, and learning for all children.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes by analyzing the relationship between curriculum discourse and teacher-reported implementation conditions. Inclusiveness is examined both as a policy aspiration embedded in curriculum texts and as a lived challenge negotiated by teachers in practice. By linking discourse analysis with practitioner accounts, the study highlights how inclusiveness is simultaneously constructed and constrained, revealing convergences and divergences between policy and practice. This relational framing provides an exploratory but theoretically grounded examination of the curriculum–practice gap across contexts. It compared how inclusivity is conceptualized and enacted in preschool education in China and Türkiye through the analysis of curriculum documents and preschool teachers' perspectives. The findings revealed that while all curricula endorsed core principles of inclusive education, they differed slightly in their emphasis, policy orientations, and underlying constructions of inclusion. At the curriculum level, inclusivity was represented with more explicit language in the Turkish programs than in the Chinese curriculum. Across both contexts, the teacher dimension emerged as the dominant component of inclusion, suggesting a shared assumption that teachers are the primary actors responsible for addressing learner diversity. In contrast, school and environmental dimensions received comparatively limited attention, indicating that inclusion continues to be framed largely as an individual pedagogical responsibility rather than a systemic and ecological process. The analysis further demonstrated important differences in the ways inclusion is constructed. The China CPEG Program primarily emphasized participation, instructional flexibility, and family–community cooperation. The current Turkish Preschool Education Program foregrounded teacher competence and professional development, whereas TYMM presented the most comprehensive approach by integrating accessibility, multidimensional assessment, emotional belonging, and individualized support. Collectively, these findings suggest that the TYMM curriculum is more closely aligned with contemporary rights-based and child-centered approaches to inclusive education. However, the integration of teacher interview data revealed a more complex picture. Although Turkish curricula contained substantially more explicit references to inclusivity, Turkish teachers frequently reported challenges related to implementation, including resource limitations, classroom conditions, and insufficient support mechanisms. In contrast, Chinese teachers generally described fewer practical obstacles in implementing inclusive practices despite the comparatively lower visibility of inclusion within curriculum documents. This finding highlights a notable policy–practice gap and suggests that the presence of inclusive principles in curriculum texts does not necessarily guarantee their effective implementation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that inclusive education should be understood not only as a curriculum discourse but also as an organizational and contextual process shaped by institutional support, professional capacity, and educational conditions. The findings therefore underscore the importance of moving beyond teacher-centered approaches toward more systemic models of inclusion that integrate accessible environments, family partnerships, professional support structures, and equitable learning opportunities for all children. From a comparative perspective, the Turkish case may be characterized as

a policy-rich but implementation-challenged model, whereas the Chinese case reflects a more moderate policy discourse accompanied by comparatively smoother implementation experiences. These findings contribute to international discussions on inclusive early childhood education by demonstrating that the effectiveness of inclusion depends not only on what is written in policy documents but also on the conditions that enable those policies to be realized in practice.

Future studies could strengthen comparability by expanding the Chinese corpus beyond the single national curriculum document. This might include regional guidelines, teacher manuals, classroom materials, or policy implementation reports, which would provide a richer and more nuanced picture of inclusiveness in practice. Incorporating such sources, alongside classroom observations and larger, more diverse teacher samples, would allow for more robust triangulation and enhance the validity of cross-national comparisons.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

TT	Turkish teacher
CT	Chinese teacher
CPEG	Chinese Preschool Education Guide
PEP	Turkish Preschool Education Program
TYMM	Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Model

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