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EXPLORING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A STUDY CONDUCTED WITHIN CHINESE UNIVERSITY CONTEXTS

^{1&2}Zeng Xiaoli & ^{1*}Low Hui Min

¹Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

²Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, China
lowhm@usm.my

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of inclusive education has led to the development of special education from isolation to integration. Although the implementation of inclusive education has achieved initial results in China, there are still many problems, including attitudinal issues among the social groups. Therefore, this study aimed to the attitudes among a sample of students in an university in China towards inclusive education; to discover the current implementation of inclusive education, predict the difficulties that may be encountered in the promotion of inclusive education in the future, and then take measures in advance to remove obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education. The revised scale has good reliability and validity. The inclusive educational attitude scale can be divided into four dimensions: physical factors, academic factors, *Behavioural* factors and social factors, and each factor contains four items. In this study, 407 students majoring in preschool education from an university in China were selected as survey objects, and the data of inclusive education attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers were analyzed by SPSS software. The results are as follows: (1) the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education is at the average level, (2) from the perspective of 16 items, students who are shy and withdrawn should be in regular classes reported the highest level of acceptance, while students who are physically aggressive towards their peers should be in regular classes reported the lowest level of acceptance, and (3) factors influencing preschool education students' acceptance of inclusive education include gender, major and whether they understand inclusive education or integrate education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Attitude; Preschool Education Students

INTRODUCTION

W. Steinback and S. Steinback (1984) put forward the idea of inclusive education. They have made clear criticisms of the dual system of mutual isolation and parallel development between special education and general education, believing that special education and general education should be recombined, constructed, and integrated into a unified education system to meet the learning needs of all children. The Salamanca Declaration issued at the World Conference on Special Needs Education

in 1994 formally defined the concept of inclusive education. It is pointed out in the declaration that inclusive education is an educational concept and process that creates an equal atmosphere of inclusive education for students to base themselves on the collective, strengthen cooperation, develop students' sound personality, and promote students' active participation in social life. With the advancement of educational democratization, countries around the world have many different interpretations of the definition of inclusive education. Salend (1998), an American scholar, believes that inclusive education is characterized by acceptance, sense of belonging and sense of community, and emphasizes that inclusive education plans should provide supportive services according to the individual differences of students to meet the needs of students. British scholars Booth and Ainscow (1998) regarded inclusive education as a process of promoting student participation and reducing student exclusion.

In China, different scholars have different definitions of inclusive education. In a broad sense, inclusive education refers to the placement of students with special educational needs in regular classrooms during part or all of their study time, and believes that regular learning conforms to the category of inclusive education (Deng & Pan, 2003; He, 2022). Huang (2003; 2012) believed that inclusive education in China is more inclined to solve the education problems of students with special educational needs. He defined inclusive education as "inclusive education is a new educational concept and a continuous educational process. It accepts all students, opposes discrimination and exclusion, promotes active participation, focuses on collective cooperation, meets different needs, and establishes an inclusive society". In short, inclusive education is changing from special education to general education worldwide. Although inclusive education has different educational connotations in different countries, its core ideas can be summarized as paying attention to students' equal right to education, strengthening students' full participation and reducing the exclusion of special students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

The concept of inclusive education was mentioned in a declaration adopted by the World Congress on Special Needs Education in 1994, which was widely accepted by the educational circle and became the direction of education reform in the world a few years later. Inclusive education is defined differently from different perspectives. From an educational perspective, both schools and communities are creating non segregated environments, allowing more special needs students to integrate and receive appropriate education in an undifferentiated environment (Li, 2018). Inclusive education advocates that regular students and students with special needs study and live together to achieve real educational fairness and democracy. This concept is gradually recognized and accepted by the education community in China, and is being transformed from a concept to action. Shi Meijun et al. (2008) pointed out that inclusive education not only conforms to the international trend, but also enables special students to enjoy the equal right to education, so that they can receive education suitable for their own development, providing them with more opportunities for further education and employment. Some scholars proposed that if China implements inclusive education, it needs to change the concept, such as from paying attention to the survival of students to actively participating, and expanding the number of education objects from some to all (Wu, 2005; Ma & Wang, 2022). This study believes that inclusive education is not only an educational trend but also an educational ideal. Inclusive education refers to serving every student in the same educational environment, providing every student with equal educational opportunities, and creating an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Research Progress in Inclusive Education

Since the 1990s, inclusive education has been developing vigorously all over the world. First of all, the connotation and extension of the concept of inclusive education continue to expand, the object of attention of inclusive education has expanded from the special population to the general population, and the field of attention has also changed from inclusive schools to inclusive society. Secondly, the research field of inclusive education is also expanding. For example, British inclusive education researchers debate on the concept of inclusive education, inclusive education and human rights view and inclusive education practice research. Research by American and Canadian scholars on special

education reform is closely linked to the concept of inclusive education. This concept represents a shift from the exclusion of children with special educational needs towards their full inclusion in mainstream schools (Grynova & Kalinichenko, 2018). Inclusive education is becoming a widely embraced trend globally, seen as a forward-thinking approach that aims to provide equitable education for individuals with disabilities, aligning with international conventions and promoting their inclusion into regular educational settings (Bilavych et al., 2022; Abdullah, 2023).

Chinese researchers mainly study the concept and practice of inclusive education and the localization of inclusive education. In terms of the historical evolution of the concept of inclusive education, Tong Yuehua (2006) divided the inclusive education reform movement in the United States into three periods: return to mainstream education, general education initiative movement and inclusive education. Qian Lixia (2009) divided inclusive education into three stages: motivation generation, initial exploration and consensus building according to the historical development of inclusive education. In terms of educational practice under the guidance of inclusive education concept, Tian Jing and Wang Ling (2004) believed that under the guidance of the concept of inclusive education, the practice of inclusive education in various countries has made some progress, and discussed the model, implementation strategies and practice characteristics of inclusive education, thus providing a reference for China's education reform. Li Fang and Deng Meng (2010) believe that foreign research on inclusive education has gone through a regression process from ideal to practice. Chinese researchers should adhere to educational practice and improve the realm of practical teaching with a broad theoretical vision and diversified research methods. In terms of inclusive education localization research, according to the study of Gan Zhaoliang et al. (2009), the development of inclusive education in China has experienced the stage of family education, school education, inclusive education and the development stage of "human-oriented special education". Deng Meng and Jing Shi (2013) believe that China lacks the cultural soil that nourishes the growth of inclusive education. Therefore, China should explore a "Learning in Same Class" model consistent with the inclusive education concept on the basis of advocating the "Learning in Regular Class" model (Xin, 2018).

Research Status of Attitudes towards Inclusive Education in China

Through combing some studies, the author found that the number of research on teachers' attitudes in China is the largest and most complete in inclusive education research. Long Lance (2010) analyzed teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for hearing impaired students from three aspects of cognition, emotion and *Behavioural* tendency in his research. The results show that the respondents accept special students to participate in inclusive education, and the degree of acceptance of special students is relatively high. Zhang Yuexin's (2016) research results show that most of the respondents have negative attitudes towards inclusive education and have certain concerns about it. They generally believe that special education schools are the most suitable places for special needs students. Zhang Li (2016) concluded that in terms of cognition, teachers are receptive to special students attending regular classes; Emotionally, it is also believed that students with special needs should have the right to attend regular classes; However, in terms of *Behavioural* tendencies, when special needs students want to attend these teachers' classes, they believe that special needs children should attend special education schools. Yang Zixuan (2021) selected 927 front-line kindergarten teachers and administrators in Chengdu as the research objects. The survey found that kindergarten teachers generally support inclusive education activities.

Education administrators include administrators in education management departments and education administrators in schools. They are important executors of the laws and regulations on inclusive education, so it is crucial to study the attitude of education administrators towards inclusive education. Wen Jiang (2010) conducted a survey on 92 primary school principals in Zhejiang Province, dividing the survey subjects into regular primary school principals and special education school principals in urban and rural areas. The research shows that principals have a positive attitude towards inclusive education as a whole. Shi Lijun (2015) surveyed the principals of some kindergartens in Heilongjiang Province through a questionnaire survey, selecting 124 people as the survey subjects. The survey results show that the acceptance of kindergarten principals to students with special educational needs is relatively low, and the effect of regular class learning (inclusive education) is not sure.

The past research findings as mentioned above are of great value in promoting the comprehensive implementation and development of inclusive education in China. However, most of the surveys only involve the attitudes of teachers, educational administrators and parents towards inclusive education, and there are comparatively fewer surveys on the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to explore the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers to inclusive education of special needs students with different types of barriers and the reasons that affect the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers to inclusive education. Understand the development of inclusive education and provide reference for promoting the development of inclusive education. The research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What is the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education according to the categories of special educational needs?
2. How does the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education differ according to year of study, gender and exposure to special education courses?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study explores the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education through using a quantitative online survey method. Compared with traditional survey methods, online surveys have many unique advantages, such as strong survey timeliness, wide survey scope, low survey cost, small human error, and simple statistical analysis (Li, 2011). The online questionnaire is distributed on an online survey platform called Sojump, where researchers distribute it directly to pre-service preschool teachers and ask other preschool education lecturers for help to the pre-service preschool teachers, using the convenient sampling method. The pre-service preschool teachers fill out the online questionnaire by clicking on the link or scanning the QR code. The questionnaire was closed one week after distribution, and a total of 407 students responded.

Sample and Sampling Method of the Study

A convenient sampling method was used to select 407 pre-service preschool teachers from a university in Nanning, Guangxi, China.

Instruments of the Study

The questionnaire used in this study is composed of demographic variables and the adapted Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES) developed by Wilczenski (1992, 1995). The first part includes six aspects: grade, gender, exposure with special education courses, understanding of inclusive education or integrated education, obtaining teacher qualification certificate, exposure with disabled people in life (such as whether family members or friends are disabilities). The second part is adapted from the American scholar Wilczenski (1992, 1995)'s Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES). This scale includes the acceptance level of college students towards special needs students in four dimensions: physical factors, academic factors, *Behavioural* factors, and social factors.

Among them, physical factors involve attitudes towards students with special needs who have physical injuries or require the use of assistive devices in class, such as "Cannot read standard print and need to use Braille should be in regular classes." Academic factors involve attitudes towards students with special needs who have poor academic performance or require individual assistance in the

classroom, such as “Academic achievement is 1 year below other students in the grade should be in regular classes.” *Behavioural* factors involve aggressive behavior or poor self-discipline towards students with special needs, such as “Do not follow school rules for conduct should be in regular classes.” Social factors involve attitudes towards social communication skills deficiencies or absenteeism among students with special needs, such as “Are frequently absent from school should be in regular classes (refer to Table 1).” The scale uses the Likert 6-point scoring method (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= disagree somewhat, 4= agree somewhat, 5= agree, 6 strongly agree). The total score is between 16 and 96. The higher the score, the more positive the attitude towards inclusive education. The scale was translated into Chinese by the author and then checked by two English-Chinese bilingual lecturers.

Table 1 Items in the adapted Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale

Item No.	Items
	Students who/whose:
1	Cannot read standard print and need to use Braille should be in regular classes.
2	Use sign language or communication boards should be in regular classes.
3	Cannot move without the help from others should be in regular classes.
4	Cannot hear conversational speech should be in regular classes.
5	Academic achievement is 1 year below other students in the grade should be in regular classes.
6	Academic is 2 or more years below the other students in the grade should be in regular classes.
7	Speech is difficult to understand should be in regular classes.
8	Need an individualized functional academic program in everyday reading and math skills should be in regular classes.
9	Do not follow school rules for conduct should be in regular classes.
10	Cannot control their behaviour and disrupt activities should be in regular classes.
11	Are physically aggressive toward their peers should be in regular classes.
12	Are verbally aggressive toward their peers should be in regular classes.
13	Are frequently absent from school should be in regular classes.
14	Are shy and withdrawn should be in regular classes.
15	Need training in self-help skills and activities of daily living should be in regular classes.
16	Have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally should be in regular classes.

FINDINGS

Demographic statistics

Using online survey methods, 407 pre-school education teachers answered this survey. The majority of them are female (93.61%, $n = 381$), while male students are only 6.39% with 26 students. Due to the fact that senior students (Year 4) were attending internship, the number of them filling out the questionnaire is the lowest, only 8.11%, with 33 students (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2 Demographic Profiles

Demographic Information	N(%)
Grade	
Year 1	81 (19.9)
Year 2	123 (30.2)
Year 3	170 (41.8)
Year 4	33 (8.1)

continued

Gender	Female	381 (93.6)
	Male	26 (6.4)
Exposure to special education courses	Yes	102 (25.1)
	No	305 (74.9)
Understanding of inclusive education or integrated education	Understanding	21 (5.2)
	Commonly	170 (41.8)
	Not understanding	216 (53.1)
Obtaining Teacher Qualification Certificate	Obtained	120 (29.5)
	Intended to take the exam	268 (65.8)
	No intention of taking the exam	19 (4.7)
Exposure with people with disabilities in life (such as whether family members or friends are disabilities)	Among family members	36 (8.8)
	Among friends	51 (12.5)
	Among others	83 (20.4)
	None	237 (58.2)

Attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers towards different types of barriers

As shown in Table 3, pre-service preschool teachers in this study have the highest mean for academic factors, indicated that they are most positive that preschoolers with academic factors can be included in the inclusive education. The mean of physical factors is second only to the mean of academic factors, followed by the mean of social factors. Finally, the mean of behavioral factors is only 3.29. This shows that among the four influencing factors, pre-service preschool teacher last positive that preschoolers with behavioral factors can be included in inclusive education.

Table 3 Preschool education pre-service teachers' attitude in students with special educational needs (N=407) □

Item No	Items	Somewhat Agree to Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Physical factors	1 Cannot read standard print and need to use Braille should be in regular classes.	57.5	3.82	1.149
	2 Use sign language or communication boards should be in regular classes.	56.8		
	3 Cannot move without the help from others	76.4		

continued

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		should be in regular classes.			
	4	Cannot hear conversational speech should be in regular classes.	51.1		
	5	Academic achievement is 1 year below other students in the grade should be in regular classes.	70.0		
	6	Academic is 2 or more years below the other students in the grade should be in regular classes.	49.4		
Academic factors				3.84	1.073
	7	Speech is difficult to understand should be in regular classes.	66.8		
	8	Need an individualized functional academic program in everyday reading and math skills should be in regular classes.	70.3		
	9	Do not follow school rules for conduct should be in regular classes.	57.2		
	10	Cannot control their behaviour and disrupt activities should be in regular classes.	42.8		
Behavioural factors				3.29	1.217
	11	Are physically aggressive toward their peers should be in regular classes.	33.7		
	12	Are verbally aggressive toward their peers should be in regular classes.	42.0		
	13	Are frequently absent from school should be in regular classes.	49.9		
	14	Are shy and withdrawn should be in regular classes.	79.1		
Social factors				3.80	1.048
	15	Need training in self-help skills and activities of daily living should be in regular classes.	61.9		
	16	Have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally	63.9		

continued

should be in regular
classes.

Based on Table 3, we can analyze the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers towards the inclusion of students with various needs in regular classes. In terms of physical factors, the highest acceptance rate, 76.4%, is for students who require assistance to move, indicating strong support for their inclusion in mainstream education (Q3). In contrast, the acceptance rate drops significantly to 51.1% for students who cannot hear conversational speech (Q4). The acceptance levels for students who need to use Braille (Q1) and those who use sign language or communication boards (Q2) are moderate, but not as high as for those needing physical assistance.

When considering academic factors, the most supported scenarios are for students whose academic performance is only one year below their peers and those requiring individualized functional academic programs in reading and math, both with a 70% approval rate. This suggests a general willingness to include students with mild academic delays in regular classrooms. However, support decreases to 49.4% for students who perform two or more grades below their peers (Q6), indicating reservations about including students with more significant academic challenges. Regarding behavioral factors, the approval for including students who do not follow school rules is 57.2%, showing a moderate level of support (Q9). However, the approval rate plummets to 33.7% for students who are physically aggressive towards their peers (Q11), reflecting a strong reluctance to include students exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

From a social perspective, the highest approval, at 79.1%, is for including shy and withdrawn students in regular classes (Q14). There is also substantial support for students needing training in self-help skills (61.9%, Q15) and those struggling with expressing their thoughts (63.9%, Q16). Conversely, the lowest approval within social factors, at 49.9%, is for students who are frequently absent from school. Overall, the analysis reveals that pre-service teachers are most supportive of including students with minor academic challenges, followed by those with physical and social needs. Behavioral factors receive the least support, particularly for students exhibiting aggressive behavior. The highest overall approval rates are for including shy and withdrawn students (Q14) and those needing physical assistance (Q3), at 79.1% and 76.4%, respectively. The lowest approval is for students who are physically aggressive (Q11), with only 33.7% support. These findings highlight the varied levels of acceptance for different types of barriers to inclusion in mainstream classrooms.

Differences in attitudes towards inclusive education among preschool education pre-service teachers

The attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers of different grades towards inclusive education is tested by ANOVA, as shown in Table 4. There is a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the physical factors of preschool education pre-service teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs, while there is no significant difference in the influencing factors of other dimensions (refer to Table 4). It seems that Year 1 and Year 2 preschool education pre-service teachers had more positive attitude towards children with physical factor of special needs than Year 3 and Year 4 preschool education pre-service teachers.

Table 4 Difference in grades

	Grade	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
Physical factor	Year 1	81	3.9198	1.21888	.13543	5.015	.002
	Year 2	123	4.0833	1.03061	.09293		
	Year 3	170	3.6485	1.14726	.08799		
	Year 4	33	3.4318	1.20103	.20907		
Academic factor	Year 1	81	3.9846	1.05575	.11731	1.983	.116
	Year 2	123	3.9573	.94343	.08507		
	Year 3	170	3.7029	1.18202	.09066		
	Year 4	33	3.7576	.91959	.16008		
Behavioural factor	Year 1	81	3.3457	1.29516	.14391	.404	.750
	Year 2	123	3.2500	1.14564	.10330		
	Year 3	170	3.2559	1.25132	.09597		
	Year 4	33	3.4773	1.13255	.19715		
Social factor	Year 1	81	3.8735	1.04965	.11663	1.306	.272
	Year 2	123	3.9187	.93787	.08457		
	Year 3	170	3.6882	1.11267	.08534		
	Year 4	33	3.7879	1.07914	.18785		

continued

An independent sample t-test was conducted on the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers of different genders towards inclusive education. Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference between male and female preschool education pre-service teachers in the social factors of inclusion ($p < .05$), with male teachers ($M = 17.23$) had a more positive attitude than female teachers ($M = 15.07$) towards the inclusion of students with social factors of special needs. There is no significant difference between male and female in the other influencing factors of inclusion ($p > .05$). Details are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Gender differences among preschool education pre-service teachers

	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
Physical factor	Male	26	16.46	4.536	1.373	0.171
	Female	381	15.18	4.596		
Academic factor	Male	26	16.04	4.530	0.831	0.406
	Female	381	15.31	4.279		
Behavioural factor	Male	26	14.00	5.492	0.909	0.364
	Female	381	13.10	4.827		
Social factor	Male	26	17.23	3.229	2.555	0.011
	Female	381	15.07	4.220		

The attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers to inclusive education who are exposed to special education courses was tested by independent sample t-test. From Table 6, it can be seen that there is no significant difference ($p > .05$) in the influencing factors of all dimensions of preschool education pre-service teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs, whether there is exposure to special education courses or not.

Table 6 Differences in exposure to special education courses

	Exposure to special education courses	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Physical factor	Yes	102	3.7868	1.12817	.128	.720
	No	305	3.8262	1.15802		
Academic factor	Yes	102	3.8652	1.05755	.022	.883
	No	305	3.8320	1.08018		
Behavioural factor	Yes	102	3.4167	1.13306	1.510	.220
	No	305	3.2475	1.24332		
Social factor	Yes	102	3.8358	0.96054	.436	.509
	No	305	3.7918	1.07744		

DISCUSSION

This paper aims to explore the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers with special needs and different types of barriers towards inclusive education, and the reasons that affect the attitudes of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education. 407 students majoring in preschool education from a university in China were selected as the research sample. The results show that preschool education pre-service teachers have different inclusive attitudes towards students with special needs of different types of barriers. Grade, gender, understanding of inclusive education or integrated education, and the situation of obtaining teacher qualification certificates affect preschool education pre-service teachers' inclusive education attitudes.

This study finds that preschool education pre-service teachers generally hold a neutral attitude towards inclusive education. This is inconsistent with the existing research results in China. Zhao Yaqi (2015)'s research results show that preschool education pre-service teachers' attitude towards inclusive education is negative, while the results of this research show that preschool education pre-service teachers' attitude towards inclusive education is neutral. This shows that the popularization and promotion of inclusive education in China has achieved initial results, and the awareness level of preschool education pre-service teachers on inclusive education is gradually improving. From the perspective of international research, the research results of Lambe and Bones (2006), Avramidis et al. (2000), Faridah and Lawrence (2012) all show that preschool education pre-service teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusive education, which indicates that the inclusive education attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers in China needs to be further improved.

Then, from the perspective of preschool education pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for children with special needs with different types of barriers. Pre-service teachers have the highest acceptance rate with shy and withdrawn students should be in regular classes and students who cannot move without the help from others should be in regular classes. This is different from the research results of Liu Chunling (2000), but the same as the research results of Li Qingen (2018). Although shy and withdrawn students may not perform well in terms of social factors, they may not affect the personal safety of other students and the progress of classroom teaching. Moreover, shy and withdrawn students may not necessarily have poorer academic performance than other students. However, the same applies to children with limited mobility. This may be the reason why preschool education pre-service teachers consider inclusive education for shy, withdrawn children and children who cannot move without the help from others, which is the most positive attitude.

This study delves into the factors influencing preschool education pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, examining grade level, gender, exposure to special education courses, and understanding of inclusive or integrated education. Significant differences were noted in attitudes towards physical inclusion across grade levels, a finding that diverges from the consistent attitudes reported in earlier studies by Chen Hong and Chen Li (2017) and Liu Yongli (2019). This discrepancy may be due to the smaller number of senior students, who are likely preoccupied with internships and work, affecting their participation. In terms of gender, male students displayed higher acceptance of

social inclusion compared to females, contrary to Liu Yongli's 2019 findings. This could be influenced by the gender imbalance in the study sample, with females comprising 93.61% and males only 6.39%. While exposure to special education courses and understanding of inclusive education were also considered, specific results from these analyses were not detailed in this summary. Overall, the research highlights that while some differences in attitudes exist, particularly by grade and gender, these findings sometimes conflict with previous studies, suggesting the influence of sample composition and the need for further investigation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study contribute some evidence to the research on the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education. That is, the attitude of preschool education pre-service teachers towards inclusive education is at the average level. Through these findings, it also provides us with a direction to focus on the development of talent development plans for preschool education students and add some special education courses.

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