

Inclusive Education in South Korea

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, inclusive education in South Korea has continued to grow both in quantity and quality. The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to report on the legal basis and the current status of inclusive education in South Korea and (b) to synthesize policy tasks and prominent outcomes related to inclusive education in South Korea. The major findings are as follows. First, according to the 2022 Special Education Annual Report provided by the Ministry of Education, approximately 73% of students eligible for special education received either part-time (56% of students) or full-time (17% of students) inclusive education. Second, it was found that there were significant outcomes in the five elements of support (i.e., human support, social climate support, physical environment support, curriculum support, and financial and operational support), which are quality indicators of inclusive education. Based on these findings, we discuss issues of inclusive education, future directions, and suggestions for the further development of inclusive education in South Korea.

Keywords

inclusive education, South Korea, human support, social climate support, physical environment support, curriculum support, financial and operational support

The beginning of inclusive education in the Republic of Korea (from here on referred to as South Korea) dates back to the 1970s. In 1971, the first special class for students with disabilities was established at an elementary school in Gyeongsangbuk-do (see Note 1), opening the door for students with disabilities to be educated in general schools (Y. Kang et al., 2009). A few years later, in 1974, more than one special class was established in each city and county across the country under the direction of the Ministry of Education. This expansion of special classes sparked the start of inclusive education in South Korea. However, some argued that the special classes could not be regarded as the triggering factor of genuine inclusive education because they were used as a means to separate students with disabilities from “general” classes at that time (S. Kang & Lim, 2021). Despite the criticism, the number of special classes in general schools continued to increase to 3,440 in 1995; 6,352 in 2008; and 27,979 in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022).

As the number of special classes increased, opportunities for students with disabilities to receive education in general schools increased. From this perspective, it can be said that changes in the educational placement for students with disabilities have contributed to the spread of inclusive education in South Korea (S. Park et al., 2012; E. Park et al., 2015). Such a continuous increase in the number of special

classes provoked active discussions on inclusive education in the 1990s (H. Choi & Park, 2018). Moreover, there was another major event that influenced the spread of inclusive education in South Korea during this time. The amendments made to the “Special Education Promotion Act” (Act No. 4716, see Note 2) in 1994 mandated the right to inclusive education. This amendment laid the legal foundation for inclusive education in South Korea, which led some to claim that actual inclusive education in South Korea began at this time (S. Kang & Lim, 2021). Later in 2007, the new special education law, “Act on Special Education for Persons with Disabilities” (Act No. 8483, see Note 3), was enacted, and specific provisions were added to advance the quality of inclusive education in South Korea (Y. Kang et al., 2009).

To comply with provisions of the inclusive education stipulated in the “Act on Special Education for Persons with Disabilities,” the Ministry of Education developed key policy tasks related to inclusive education. These policy tasks

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were specified in the “Five-year Special Education Development Plan” announced every 5 years by the Ministry of Education. The key policy tasks regarding inclusive education in South Korea can be found in the 1st through 6th plans: (a) First 5-Year Welfare Development Plan for Persons with Disabilities (1998–2002), (b) Second 5-Year Welfare Development Plan for Individuals with Disabilities (2003–2007), (c) Third 5-Year Special Education Development Plan (2008–2012), (d) Fourth 5-Year Special Education Development Plan (2013–2017), (e) Fifth 5-Year Special Education Development Plan (2018–2022), and (f) Sixth 5-Year Special Education Development Plan (2023–2027). Moreover, the outcomes of the policy tasks related to inclusive education were reported in the Special Education Annual Reports. As such, the Korean government is making significant efforts to take a qualitative leap forward in providing inclusive education (K. Park et al., 2022).

As mentioned above, inclusive education has been developing over the past several decades in South Korea. However, there was no prior research that synthesized the evolution of inclusive education, important policy tasks, and outcomes related to inclusive education in South Korea. Thus, this article aims to provide a summary of the body of inclusion work in South Korea.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to report on the legal basis and the current status of inclusive education in South Korea and (b) to synthesize policy tasks and prominent outcomes related to inclusive education in South Korea. Based on the results, this study discusses the issues of inclusive education and future directions and suggestions to further inclusive education in South Korea.

Legal Basis and Current Status of Inclusive Education in South Korea

In this section, the special education laws are introduced, which are the legal basis for inclusive education in South Korea. And then, data on the current status of inclusive education for students with disabilities in South Korea are provided.

Legal Basis for Inclusive Education

The legal grounds for inclusive education in South Korea can be found in the “Special Education Promotion Act” of 1994 (Act No. 4716), known as the former special education law and the “Act on Special Education for Persons with Disabilities” of 2007 (Act No. 8483), which is the current special education law. The major provisions related to inclusive education specified in these two laws are compared in Table 1. As can be seen from the definitions of

inclusive education presented in Table 1, the former act focused merely on the social adaptability of students with disabilities or temporary inclusion for students with disabilities. However, the new act specifically defines what inclusive education means. Unlike the former act, this new act promotes social and curricular inclusion beyond mere physical inclusion (see Note 4). Also, as shown in Table 1, this new act laid down critical provisions not included in the former act to improve the quality of inclusive education, such as capacity enhancement of teachers to promote teacher competencies for inclusive education, operation of curriculum to make adaptations to meet the needs of students with disabilities, inclusive education to develop a comprehensive inclusive education plan and build a barrier-free educational environment, and itinerant education to support students with disabilities who participate in full inclusion (see Table 1).

Current Status of Inclusive Education

According to the 2022 Special Education Annual Report, a total of 103,695 students are currently receiving special education in South Korea (Ministry of Education, 2022). Of these students, 72.8% receive part-time or full-time inclusive education in general schools (see Table 2). Compared with 1997, the percentage of students with disabilities receiving part-time or full-time inclusive education in general schools continues to increase (52.6% in 1997 to 72.8% in 2022). Furthermore, the percentage of students with disabilities receiving full-time inclusive education (0.0% in 1997 to 16.9% in 2022) and part-time inclusive education (52.6% in 1997 to 55.9%) continues to increase (Ministry of Education, 1997, 2022). This phenomenon depicts the continuous quantitative growth of inclusive education in South Korea.

As shown in Table 2, the percentage of students with disabilities receiving inclusive education differs by the type of disability. The types of disabilities for which more than 90% of students received inclusive education were health impairments (99.5%), learning disabilities (99.1%), emotional and behavioral disorders (95.3%), developmental delays (92.4%), and communication disorders (92.1%). The types of disabilities for which less than 60% of students with disabilities received inclusive education were autism (58.9%), physical impairments (58.8%), and visual impairments (38.6%). The types of disabilities for which 60% to 90% of students received inclusive education were hearing impairments (79.8%) and intellectual disabilities (73.1%). These results may imply that students with disabilities that do not involve intellectual disability (i.e., health impairments, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders) tend to be placed in inclusive settings at a higher rate than those who have more significant disabilities accompanied by intellectual disability and/or require extensive support

Table 1. Legal Basis for Inclusive Education in South Korea.

Major Provisions	Special Education Promotion Act of 1994 (former special education law)	Act on Special Education for Persons with Disabilities of 2007 (current special education law)
Definitions	<p>6. Inclusive education means educating individuals eligible for special education in general schools (referring to schools other than special education institutions) to develop social adaptability or educating students enrolled in special education institutions by temporarily participating in the general education curriculum. (Article 2: Definitions)</p> <p>4. Special class means a class operated as full-time-part-time-special guidance-itinerant education, established at each level of school below high school, to provide inclusive education to individuals eligible for special education. (Article 2: Definitions)</p>	<p>6. Inclusive education means education provided for individuals eligible for special education in a general school with other individuals of the same age suitable for each individual's educational needs without any discrimination according to the type and level of disability. (Article 2: Definitions)</p> <p>11. Special class means a class established in a general school to provide inclusive education to individuals eligible for special education. (Article 2: Definitions)</p>
Capacity Enhancement of Teachers	None	(2) The State and local government shall generally provide the teachers of general schools with education and training related to special education to support the inclusive education of individuals eligible for special education. (Article 8: Capacity-Enhancement of Teachers)
Operation of Curriculum	None	20. The head of a general school where individuals eligible for special education are placed may adjust and operate the contents of the curriculum by considering the type and degree of disability (Article 20: Operation of Curriculum)
Inclusive Education	None	<p>21. (2) The head of a general school where individuals eligible for special education are placed, shall implement a comprehensive inclusive education plan, which includes the adjustment of curriculum, assignment of support staff, provision of learning assistive devices, and training of teachers, etc. (Article 21: Inclusive Education)</p> <p>21. (3) If the head of a general school provides inclusive education, she or he shall install and operate a special class and be equipped with the facility, equipment, textbooks, and teaching equipment. (Article 21: Inclusive Education)</p>
Itinerant Education	14. (1) A superintendent of education shall conduct itinerant education or dispatch education if necessary for the education of individuals eligible for special education who receive inclusive education. (Article 14: Itinerant Education)	25. (1) The head of each district office of education or a superintendent of education shall conduct itinerant education by placing special education teachers and individuals in charge of special education-related services to support individuals eligible for special education who receive inclusive education in the general school. (Article 25: Itinerant Education)

Note. Key provisions related to inclusive education are presented.

(i.e., autism, physical impairments, and visual impairment). Among students who receive inclusive education, the percentage of full-time inclusive education was the highest for students with health impairments (93.9%), followed by those with hearing impairments (57.0%), communication disorders (38.1%), learning disabilities (37.6%), emotional and behavioral disorders (32.7%), and developmental delays (26.6%). Also, the percentage of part-time inclusive education was the highest for students with developmental delays (65.9%), followed by those with intellectual disability

(63.3%), emotional-behavioral disorders (62.6%), learning disabilities (61.5%), communication disorders (53.9%), and autism (52.4%).

Policy Tasks and Prominent Outcomes Related to Inclusive Education in South Korea

In this section, policy tasks on inclusive education, which are included in the 5-year special education development

Table 2. 2022 Status of Students With Disabilities Receiving Special Education and Educational Environment by Types of Disabilities (Unit: Number of Students, %).

Types of disabilities	Special schools (including special education support center ^a)	General schools		Subtotal	Total
		Special class (part-time inclusion)	Inclusive class (full-time inclusion)		
Visual impairments	1,077 (61.4)	226 (12.9)	450 (25.7)	676 (38.6)	1,753 (100)
Hearing impairments	597 (20.2)	675 (22.8)	1,689 (57.0)	2,364 (79.8)	2,961 (100)
Intellectual disability	14,436 (26.9)	34,162 (63.6)	5,120 (9.5)	39,282 (73.1)	53,718 (100)
Physical impairments	3,974 (41.2)	3,308 (34.3)	2,357 (24.5)	5,665 (58.8)	9,639 (100)
Emotional-behavioral disorders	8 (4.7)	1,169 (62.6)	609 (32.7)	1,778 (95.3)	1,865 (100)
Autism	6,997 (41.1)	8,917 (52.4)	1,110 (6.5)	10,027 (58.9)	17,024 (100)
Communication disorders	208 (7.9)	1,414 (53.9)	1,000 (38.1)	2,414 (92.1)	2,622 (100)
Learning disabilities	10 (0.9)	663 (61.5)	405 (37.6)	1,068 (99.1)	1,078 (100)
Health impairments	9 (0.5)	110 (10.2)	1,829 (93.9)	1,939 (99.5)	1,948 (100)
Developmental delays	838 (7.6)	7,304 (65.9)	2,945 (26.6)	10,249 (92.4)	11,087 (100)
Total	28,233 (27.2)	57,948 (55.9)	17,514 (16.9)	75,462 (72.8)	103,695 (100)

Note. In the current special education law (2022. 6. 28., partly amended), multiple disabilities (i.e., severe and multiple disabilities, blind deaf) were added as a new disability category, but no data are available yet.

^aThe superintendent of education may, if necessary, install and operate two or more special education support centers in a subordinate educational administrative agency, which is in charge of early finding, diagnosis and evaluation of persons eligible for special education, information management, training of special education, support for faculty and learning activity, provision of special education-related service, itinerant education, and so on. Some infants and toddlers with disabilities are placed in the special education support center.

plans, were briefly introduced. Then, major outcomes of inclusive education presented in the special education annual reports are synthesized.

Policy Tasks Related to Inclusive Education

The policy tasks related to inclusive education included in the first to the sixth 5-year special education development plans were aimed to fulfill the requirements of the Special Education Act (e.g., improvement of competencies of general and special education teachers about inclusive education). In addition, some policy tasks were aimed at responding to the changes and demands in society (e.g., continuous increase in the number of students with disabilities included in inclusive classes) and resolving issues of inclusive education revealed through research studies (e.g., insufficient itinerant education for students with disabilities receiving full-time inclusion).

Representative policy tasks related to inclusive education were as follows: expanding opportunities for cooperative teaching to promote collaboration between general and special education teachers, producing and disseminating supplemental textbooks, developing manuals on assessment accommodations, developing programs to improve disability awareness, reducing the number of students in inclusive classes, and increasing the number of itinerant teachers to provide special education to students with disabilities receiving full-time inclusive education in general schools or attending general schools without special classes (Ministry of Education, 2008, 2013, 2018).

Prominent Outcomes of Inclusive Education in South Korea

The Korean Ministry of Education submits a special education annual report to Congress. The annual report contains information on the current status and major outcomes related to various policy tasks including inclusion work. The special education annual reports from 1994 to 2022 were analyzed in 5-year increments in line with the first through fifth 5-year special education development plans (i.e., 1998–2002, 2003–2007, 2008–2012, 2013–2017, 2018–2022). Since the first 5-year special education development plan was established in 1988, the special education annual reports from 1994 to 1997 were analyzed, not aligned with the 5-year special education plan. Furthermore, the 2023 special education annual report was not published at the time of writing this article; it was excluded from the analysis.

The prominent outcomes of inclusive education included in the annual reports were analyzed according to the five elements of support which are quality indicators of inclusive education claimed by S. Kim (2013) and S. Park et al. (2012). These five elements of support include human support, social climate support, physical environment support, curriculum support, and financial and operational support (see Figure 1). Table 3 presents the operational definitions for the five elements of support. Reliability of data collection was attained by combining independent reviews, inter-coder comparisons, and coding clarification. The shaded areas in Table 4 indicate that inclusion-related policy tasks

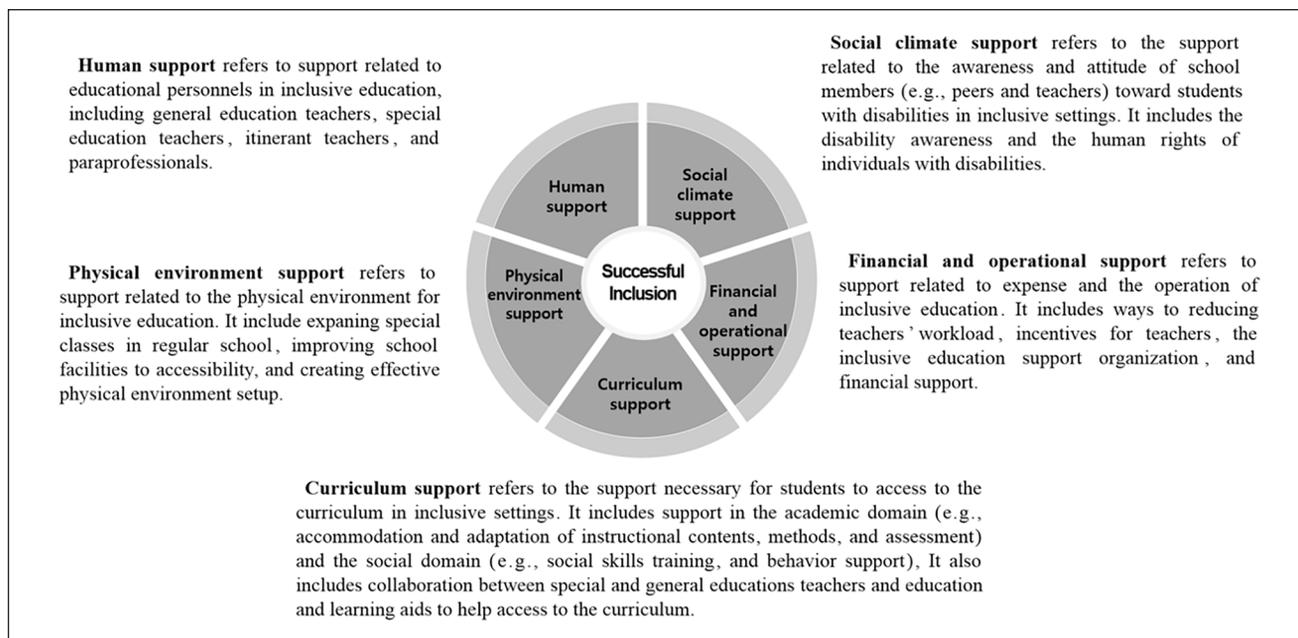


Figure 1. The five elements of support for inclusive education.

have been implemented in the five elements of support during 5-year period. The prominent outcomes related to inclusive education are summarized as follows.

First, regarding “human support,” the educational personnel supporting inclusive education have become more diversified over time, not only general and special education teachers but also itinerant teachers and paraprofessionals. Professional development was also provided to general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals to improve their expertise in inclusive education. The number of general education teachers who completed more than 60 hr of in-service training in special education has increased from 430 in 1994 to 17,850 in 2022. In addition, general education teacher preparation programs mandated preservice teachers to take the “Introduction to Special Education” class to build an understanding of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the itinerant services for students with disabilities receiving full-time inclusive education have been expanded. As a result, the number of students with disabilities receiving itinerant services increased from 606 in 1996 to 4,565 in 2022. It was also reported that the number of paraprofessionals supporting inclusive education increased from 2,329 in 2002 to 13,222 in 2022.

Second, regarding “social climate support,” efforts have been made to improve disability awareness among general school members and to protect the human rights of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. As a result of expanding disability awareness education, 46.4% of all general schools conducted disability awareness education once a year in 2013, while 93.3% of all schools conducted disability awareness education twice a year in 2021. In addition, the number of training programs for teachers to protect the

human rights of students with disabilities increased from 304 in 2013 to 428 in 2022.

Third, regarding “physical environment support,” the number of special classes for students with disabilities continued to increase from 3,400 in 1994 to 12,712 in 2022. The criteria for establishing special classes were adjusted along with the quantitative increase in special classes. Notably, standards for establishing special classes within general schools and the class size per special education were set to ensure the quality of education. In 2000, two special classes were simply established for every 30 classes in general schools. However, in 2007, the number of students per special class was 4 for kindergarten, 6 for elementary and middle school, and 7 for high schools. Furthermore, continued efforts were made to enhance physical accessibility and to promote participation in educational activities for students with disabilities in general schools. The number of general schools meeting the standards for facility establishment increased significantly from 1,583 in 2002 to 12,231 in 2021.

Fourth, regarding “curriculum support,” many efforts were made to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the curriculum, such as developing supplementary workbooks, providing education and learning aids, developing a collaborative model for co-teaching between general and special education teachers, and promoting collaboration among professionals involved in inclusive education. In addition, manuals for assessment accommodations for students with disabilities who have access to the general curriculum and for alternative assessments were developed and implemented for a fair assessment of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. In particular, the number of the “Jeongdaun School,” which is the model school operating co-teaching between

Table 3. Operational Definitions of the Five Elements of Support for Inclusive Education.

Elements of support		Operational definition
Human support	Professional development for general education teachers	Professional development for in-service general education teachers and university curriculum for preservice general education teachers to improve expertise related to inclusive education
	Professional development for special education teachers	Professional development for in-service special education teachers and university curriculum for preservice special education teachers to improve expertise related to inclusive education
	Itinerant services of itinerant teachers	Itinerant services of itinerant teachers for students who are placed in full-time general education classes
	Provision of paraprofessionals	Provision of paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings
	Professional development for paraprofessionals	Professional development for paraprofessionals to increase their understanding of inclusive education
Social climate support	Improving awareness of Individuals with disabilities	Disability awareness programs or activities for students, parents, and school staff
	Protecting the human rights of students with disabilities	Education of school personnel for human rights protection of students with disabilities in inclusive settings and the organizations for human rights protection of students with disabilities in inclusive settings
Physical environment support	Expansion of special classes in general schools	Expansion of special classes in general schools to include students with disabilities in general schools
	Physical environment setup	Classroom arrangement, seating arrangement, and location of paraprofessionals in the classroom to promote inclusive education
	School facilities	School facilities to enhance physical accessibility at schools (e.g., accessible entrance, accessible toilet, etc.)
Curriculum support	Supporting curriculum access	Support for academic domains (e.g., accommodation and adaptation of instructional content, method, and assessment to make the curriculum accessible) and social domains (e.g., social skills training, behavioral support) to ensure curriculum access for students with disabilities
	Inclusion program and supplementary workbook	Inclusion programs and supplementary workbooks to promote inclusive education
	Teacher collaboration	Collaboration between general and special education teachers to effectively deliver the curriculum (e.g., co-teaching)
	Collaboration with other professionals	Collaboration with other professionals outside the school to support inclusion
	Education and learning aids	Education and learning aids to support access to the curriculum for students with disabilities in inclusive settings
Financial and Operational support	Reducing the workload of teachers	Support for reducing teachers' workload, including reducing the number of students, reducing administrative duties, etc.
	Incentives for teachers	Provision of incentives such as promotion transfer bonuses, allowance payments, etc.
	Inclusive education support organization	Inclusive education support organizations support teachers who need consultation and/or help to practice inclusive education in schools
	Financial support	Financial support for the operation of inclusive classes in general schools

general and special education teachers, was 40 in 2018 but increased to 104 in 2022.

Fifth, regarding “financial and operational support,” the number of students in inclusive classes was reduced to alleviate the workload of general education teachers, and incentives were provided to those who run inclusive classes. Furthermore, inclusive education support organizations have gradually increased to support teachers practicing inclusive education in school. In 2022, there were 198 special education support centers, 173 inclusive education support teams, 47 disability-specific support centers, and

approximately 84 inclusive support offices. Financial support has also been provided to operate inclusive classes since 2018.

Next Steps and Suggestions for Future Work

The reauthorization of the “Special Education Promotion Act” in 1994 established the legal basis for inclusive education in South Korea. Since then, inclusive education has expanded, resulting in quantitative growth. According to

Table 4. Analysis Results of the Special Education Annual Reports Focusing on the Five Support Elements for Inclusive Education.

Five support elements	Period					Prominent outcomes
	1994–1997	1998–2002	2003–2007	2008–2012	2013–2017	
Human support	Professional development for general education teachers					1. Enhancement of inclusive education for teachers ex) 430 general education teachers receiving over 60 hours of professional development training in 1994 → 17,850 in 2022 2. Introduction to Special Education class for preservice general education teachers was made compulsory in 2009 3. Expansion of itinerant services for students with disabilities placed in full-time inclusive class ex) 606 students receiving itinerant services in 1996 → 4,565 in 2022 4. The increase of paraprofessionals supporting inclusive education ex) 2,329 paraprofessionals in 2002 → 13,222 in 2022
	Professional development for special education teachers					
	Itinerant services of itinerant teachers					
	Provision of paraprofessionals					
Social climate support	Improving awareness of individuals with disabilities					1. Expansion of disability awareness programs and activities ex) 46.4% of schools conducting disability awareness education once a year in 2003 → 93.3% of schools conducting disability awareness education twice a year in 2021 2. Ensuring the human rights of students with disabilities ex) 304 trainings on protecting the human rights of students with disabilities in 2013 → 428 trainings in 2022
	Protecting the human rights of students with disabilities					
Physical environment support	Expansion of special classes in general schools					1. Expansion of special education classes ex) 3,400 special classes in 1994 → 12,712 in 2022 2. Setting standards for the special class establishment and the number of students with disabilities per special class in general schools ex) 2 special classes per 30 classes in general schools in 2000 → 4, 6, 6, 7 students with disabilities in each special class for kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and high school, respectively, 2007 3. Establishment of standards for facilities ex) 1,583 schools met standards for facility establishment for inclusion in 2002 → 12,231 in 2021
	School facilities					
Curriculum support	Supporting curriculum access					1. Implementing assessment accommodation and adaptation for students with disabilities 2. Development and dissemination of inclusive education programs and supplementary workbooks 3. Development of the collaborative model between general and special education teachers. ex) 40 'Jeongdaun School' to facilitate collaboration between general and special education teachers in 2018 → 104 in 2022
	Inclusion program and supplementary workbook					
	Teacher collaboration					
Financial and Operational support	Education and learning aids					1. Reducing the number of students per inclusive class and providing incentives to general education teachers running inclusive classes 2. Diversification of inclusive education support organizations ex) 26 special education support centers in 2001 → 198 special education support centers, 173 inclusive education support teams, 47 disability-specific support centers, 84 inclusive education support offices in 2022 3. Providing financial support for inclusive classes
	Reducing the workload of teachers					
	Incentives for teachers					
	Inclusive education support organization					
Financial support						

the 2022 Special Education Annual Report, 75,462 out of 103,336 students eligible for special education were placed in inclusive settings, which is approximately 73% of students with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2022). Among them, 57,948 students were placed in part-time special classes, and 17,514 students were placed in full-time inclusive classes. Therefore, inclusive education is no longer an “ideal” but a “reality” in South Korea. Despite this quantitative growth in inclusive education, significant challenges still remain for inclusion to be successful.

Successful inclusion depends on many elements. One of the most critical elements is human support, including the support of general education teachers, special education teachers, itinerant teachers, and paraprofessionals. This study found that professional development for general education teachers through short-term in-service training was highly emphasized. Also, preservice general education teachers were required to take a course on the “Introduction to Special Education” at their teacher training universities to prepare for inclusive education. It is encouraging that steady efforts have been made to enhance the expertise of general education teachers regarding inclusive education, but general education teachers still state that they lack competency in inclusive education (Jeong, 2017; K. Kim, 2022; H. Kim & Baek, 2017). In particular, general education teachers claimed that the contents of the training needed to be more sufficient and practical to successfully run inclusive classes (Lim & Hong, 2023; M. Park & Kwon, 2020). The contents of in-service training for general education teachers and the introductory class for preservice general education teachers generally focused on understanding the characteristics of students with disabilities (S. Lee & Kang, 2021; Yang et al., 2009). As we know, general education teachers should be equipped with many other competencies, such as setting up a physical environment to promote students’ participation in inclusive settings, finding ways to improve students’ social inclusion, utilizing universal designs, and making adaptations to improve student’s access to the curriculum. Without this expertise, it will be difficult to guarantee the qualitative growth of inclusive education (Forlin & Sin, 2017). Therefore, the professional development for general education teachers needs to be more practical and case-based to promote physical, social, and curricular inclusion (D. Kang et al., 2008; Ryu & Noh, 2016). In addition, professional development should be an ongoing process, including training, practice and feedback, and follow-up support (Song & Lee, 2022; Won & Um, 2007). Furthermore, preservice teachers need to strengthen their competencies in inclusive education through field practicum in inclusive settings (A. Choi & Park, 2009; M. Lee & Shin, 2021).

Furthermore, this study indicated that the professional development of special education teachers was insufficient compared with that of general education teachers. Because

a majority of students with disabilities in South Korea receive part-time inclusive education in special classes, it is necessary for special education teachers, who are in charge of special classes, to improve their competencies to help students with disabilities access curriculum based on their education needs. According to several previous studies, there is a demand for special education teachers to have the expertise to make accommodations and adaptations in areas such as instructional content, teaching methods, and assessment for various types of disabilities (D. Kim & Shin, 2012; Kwon, 2016; K. Park & Seo, 2019; Seo & Park, 2019), physical disabilities (Jung et al., 2022; J. Kim et al., 2020), visual impairments (J. Kang & Kim, 2012), and hearing impairments (H. Lee et al., 2022). Besides, successful inclusive education requires collaboration between general and special education, so it is recommended that teacher training opportunities be increased where general and special education teachers can participate together to improve their inclusive education competencies and collaboration skills (Jeong, 2017).

Meanwhile, about 17% of students with disabilities were placed in inclusive classes on a full-time basis in 2022. These students are placed in general schools either with special classes or without special classes. Until now, most of the itinerant education was provided only to those placed in general schools with no special classes due to a shortage of itinerant teachers. Furthermore, itinerant education was not provided for students with disabilities who did not apply for the services (Han, 2013; H. Kim, 2015). More concerning, issues related to the quality of itinerant education were also pointed out, such as insufficient time for itinerant education services, lack of collaboration with general education teachers, and problems with the expertise of itinerant teachers (S. Kang et al., 2020; H. Kim, 2015). Considering these problems related to itinerant education, there is a need to increase the number of itinerant teachers to support students with disabilities who receive full-time inclusion and to enhance itinerant teachers’ expertise for inclusive education (J. Kim et al., 2019).

Another element leading to successful inclusion is social climate support. The attitudes of peers and teachers toward students with disabilities are among the most significant factors for successful inclusion (Lindsay, 2016). Based on the results of this study, there have been continued efforts to improve awareness of students with disabilities since 2003, and it was found that 93% of general schools are conducting disability awareness improvement education for all students twice a year in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022). Nevertheless, it was indicated that peer acceptance and social interactions between students with and without disabilities were still lacking (De Boer et al., 2014; D. Lee & Kim, 2013). It is often recognized that conducting disability awareness education twice a year is a fulfillment criterion, not a minimum criterion. To improve awareness of

disabilities, such one-time education is not enough; it is necessary to provide more opportunities for students with and without disabilities to have ongoing interactions within the school routine. The good news is that the recently announced sixth 5-year special education development plan, which is effective from 2023, established various policy tasks aimed at improving awareness of individuals with disabilities by encouraging general schools to develop various programs, such as joint student sports clubs that students with and without disabilities can participate in and student clubs promoting disability awareness. Furthermore, the development of the “School Disability Awareness Index” to diagnose the level of disability awareness among school members and the textbook that includes content on disability awareness are new policy tasks for improving disability awareness education. Moreover, the sixth plan includes policy tasks to expand the target of disability awareness education to parents of students without disabilities to create a disability-friendly school culture. Overall, it is necessary to establish social climate support for successful inclusion through these policy tasks.

Physical environment support is also critical for successful inclusion. Inclusive education in South Korea started with one special class in 1971, and now there are 12,712 special classes in 2022. It can be said that the quantitative expansion of inclusive education was achieved through the steady expansion of special classes. However, expanding special classes does not guarantee that students with disabilities are placed in an appropriate environment that meets their needs. Inclusive education in South Korea appears to focus more on “placement” than “appropriate education” (S. Kim, 2006). Looking at the case of the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 does not use the term, inclusive education. Instead, it specifies that free appropriate public education (FAPE) is provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In South Korea, however, students with disabilities receiving inclusive education are placed in inclusive classes, either on a part-time or full-time basis. Most students in part-time inclusive education receive the Korean language and mathematics classes in special classes and other subjects are taught in inclusive classes (S. Kim, 2013; J. Kim, 2020). This suggests that special classes are operated somewhat uniformly regardless of students’ unique needs. Thus, it is necessary to develop an inclusive education service delivery system that can guarantee “education” appropriate for the educational needs of students with disabilities. For this, a new inclusive model should be developed to ensure the educational needs of students with disabilities, like a continuum of services model mandated in IDEA. In addition, collaborative consultation and/or co-teaching between general and special education teachers should be provided for students with disabilities receiving full-time inclusive education, not limited to itinerant education.

In addition, curriculum support is necessary for inclusive education to be successful. In the “Act on Special Education for Persons with Disabilities”, special education is defined as “education conducted through the provision of a curriculum and related services appropriate to the characteristics to meet the educational needs of students eligible for special education.” Thus, students with disabilities have the right to access the curriculum that meets their needs in inclusive settings. One element that stands out as a barrier to achieving successful inclusion is the “one size fits all” curriculum. The curricular rigidity makes it difficult to address the educational needs that may arise in inclusive classes (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011). According to research studies, instructional content, method, and assessment accommodations and adaptations in the academic domain (J. Kim, 2022; Son & Lim, 2021), and behavioral and social support have been provided to students with disabilities (Jeon et al., 2022; K. Kim, 2022; H. Park & Kim, 2022). However, the annual reports provided outcomes mainly on assessment accommodations and adaptations, and outcomes on adaptations related to instructional content and teaching methods as well as social and behavioral support were rarely provided. Also, the annual reports indicated that inclusive education programs and supplementary workbooks were developed and disseminated, but these were supplementary to the formal curriculum. Thus, it is necessary to develop a curriculum accessible to students with disabilities based on a universal learning design, not limited to developing additional programs and supplementary workbooks.

Teacher collaboration is also essential to ensure curriculum support. Although the effectiveness of co-teaching has been examined in research studies (Jeon et al., 2022; N. Kim, 2016), the educational field is still experiencing stagnation due to the limitations and obstacles (e.g., no legal basis for co-teaching) in South Korea (N. Kim, 2016; Yoo, 2006). For instance, in 2018, 40 “Jeongdaun Schools” were operated across the country to implement co-teaching between general and special education teachers, and this phenomenon has continued to expand resulting in 104 schools in 2022. However, a collaboration that focuses not only on the quantitative expansion of “Jeongdaun School” but also on positive changes in both the academic and social aspects of students with disabilities is needed for successful inclusion.

Moreover, several studies have also indicated that both general and special education teachers need financial and operational support for successful inclusive education (B. Kim & Chung, 2013; S. Park et al., 2012; E. Park et al., 2016). This study showed that the number of inclusive education support organizations (e.g., 173 inclusion support centers, 47 inclusion support teams, and 84 inclusion support offices) has continuously increased. Research suggested that teachers who were confident in their support networks had more positive viewpoints toward inclusion

than other teachers (Saloviita, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to expand inclusive education support organizations that can provide the necessary support to teachers who practice inclusive education in schools.

Conclusion

Inclusive education in South Korea is like a significant stream, and so it will continue to expand. As mandated in the current special education law, inclusive education in South Korea strives for social and curricular inclusion beyond simple physical inclusion. This study indicated that various policy tasks are in place to improve the quality of inclusive education. Also, the prominent outcomes of inclusive education are provided in this study but should be approached with caution because problems related to inclusive education still exist. An important implication was drawn through this study. Currently, several policy tasks for inclusive education have been developed within a series of “Five-year Special Education Development Plans” in South Korea. However, a short- and long-term development plan for inclusive education is not established nationally. A comprehensive inclusion development plan will serve as a guide to set the mission and directions of inclusive education, establish systematic policies and tasks related to inclusive education, and manage and monitor inclusion-related outcomes to improve the quality of inclusive education in the nation. Therefore, it is necessary to establish and operate an inclusion development plan at the national level.

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Notes

1. Gyeongsangbuk-do is one of the seven provinces located in the southeastern part of South Korea.
2. “Special Education Promotion Act” was passed in 1977 and repealed in 2007, and it was the first special education act in South Korea (Han & Kim, 2008).
3. “Act on Special Education for Students with Disabilities” was passed in 2007, and it is the current special education act in South Korea (Han & Kim, 2008).
4. In this study, physical inclusion is defined as simply placing students with disabilities in inclusive classes. Social inclusion refers to educating students with disabilities with their peers without disabilities in general schools. Curricular inclusion means providing appropriate education based on the needs of students with disabilities (Park, 2004).

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