

Beyond Placement in Regular Classrooms: A Conceptual Framework for Meaningful Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in China

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ABSTRACT:

China has expanded educational access for students with disabilities through the policy direction commonly known as Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC). However, placement in mainstream settings does not necessarily ensure meaningful inclusion. This integrative conceptual review examines inclusion in China as a multidimensional process shaped by communication, curriculum and assessment, and school leadership. Drawing on scholarship in inclusive education, disability studies, curriculum, communication, and leadership, the paper proposes the ARPR framework, comprising four interrelated dimensions: Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness. Access concerns entry to learning opportunities and support; Recognition concerns the legitimacy of learner diversity; Participation concerns meaningful engagement in academic and social life; and Responsiveness concerns the capacity of schools to adapt pedagogy, assessment, resources, and organizational arrangements. The framework highlights how school-level conditions mediate whether formal placement develops into substantive inclusion. The paper argues that inclusive education should be evaluated not only by where students are placed, but by whether they can access learning, participate meaningfully, experience recognition, and receive appropriate institutional responses. The framework offers implications for policy, school leadership, classroom practice, and future research in China and other policy-intensive education systems.

Keywords: inclusive education; students with disabilities; school leadership; curriculum adaptation; education quality

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central principle in contemporary education policy,

reflecting the commitment that all learners should have access to high-quality education in systems that respect dignity, diversity, and equity

(Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2006). For students with disabilities, this shift is particularly significant because exclusion has historically taken the form of segregation, restricted access to curriculum, low expectations, and institutional practices that frame difference primarily as deficit. Yet inclusion cannot be reduced to physical placement in mainstream classrooms. Students may be present in regular schools while remaining excluded from meaningful learning, communication, peer interaction, or appropriate support (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2014; Haug, 2017).

This distinction is especially important in China. Over recent decades, China has substantially expanded educational access for students with disabilities, particularly through the policy approach commonly known as Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC). These developments represent important progress toward broader educational participation. However, implementation remains uneven, and placement alone does not resolve barriers related to teacher preparation, curriculum and assessment, communication, school resources, organizational capacity, and social attitudes (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2022; Xu et al., 2018). The central question is therefore not only whether students with disabilities enter regular classrooms, but whether those classrooms and schools are capable of supporting meaningful participation and learning.

This paper approaches inclusion as an institutional and pedagogical process rather than solely as a matter of access or placement. It focuses on three school-level domains that are especially important for the quality of inclusion: language and communication, curriculum and assessment, and school leadership. Communication influences whether students can understand, express themselves, and participate; curriculum and assessment determine access to valued learning and legitimate forms of achievement; and leadership shapes how policy, resources, professional learning, and support structures are organized within schools

(DeMatthews et al., 2020; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

To integrate these dimensions, the article proposes the ARPR framework, which conceptualizes meaningful inclusion through four interrelated dimensions: Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness. Access concerns whether learners can use educational opportunities and supports; Recognition concerns whether learner diversity is treated as legitimate and valued; Participation concerns active engagement in academic and social life; and Responsiveness concerns the capacity of schools to adapt pedagogy, assessment, resources, and organization in response to learner diversity. The framework therefore connects students' educational experiences with the institutional conditions that enable or constrain inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

Methodologically, the article adopts an integrative literature review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. It brings together foundational and recent scholarship on inclusive education, disability, communication, curriculum and assessment, school leadership, and the Chinese LRC context. The synthesis is intended to support conceptual integration and the development of the ARPR framework rather than exhaustive coverage of each literature domain (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The overall argument is that inclusive education in China should be judged not only by whether students with disabilities are placed in regular classrooms, but by whether schools create the conditions for them to access learning, be recognized, participate meaningfully, and receive responsive support. By bringing these dimensions together, the paper offers a framework for analyzing the quality of inclusion beyond placement and for informing future policy, practice, and research.

2. From Placement to Meaningful Inclusion

The distinction between placement and meaningful inclusion is fundamental to special and inclusive education. Historically, many

students with disabilities were educated through segregated arrangements such as special schools, special classes, or parallel programs. Inclusive education emerged partly as a response to these arrangements, shifting attention from whether students could fit existing systems to how educational environments could be organized to support learner diversity (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Haug, 2017).

However, inclusion is still often interpreted too narrowly as placement in mainstream settings. Placement provides important information about where students are educated, but it does not reveal the quality of their educational experience. A student may be present in a regular classroom while having limited access to communication, curriculum, peer interaction, or appropriate support. For this reason, scholars distinguish between formal inclusion, which concerns admission or physical presence, and substantive inclusion, which concerns meaningful participation, access to learning, belonging, and educational progress (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2014; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

Meaningful inclusion therefore requires attention to more than presence. It involves participation in academic and social life, recognition of students as legitimate members of the school community, and responsiveness to learner diversity through appropriate pedagogical and organizational support. Where disability is framed primarily as deficit or burden, students may be physically included but remain culturally or educationally marginalized. Similarly, where schools are unwilling or unable to adapt teaching, communication, resources, or routines, inclusion may remain largely symbolic (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Koster et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2025).

This perspective also supports a relational understanding of inclusion. Educational participation is shaped not only by individual impairment but also by the interaction between learners and school environments. Classroom language, curriculum design, assessment practices, school routines, and support structures can either reduce or intensify barriers. A relational

perspective therefore shifts part of the analytical focus from what students cannot do to how educational environments can be redesigned to support participation and learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Such an approach does not eliminate the need for specialized support. Many students with disabilities may still require assistive technology, therapeutic services, individualized planning, or specialist expertise. The key issue is whether such support enables participation in shared educational opportunities rather than reinforcing separation. Inclusive education therefore does not reject specialized provision; it asks how specialized knowledge and resources can be organized in ways that strengthen inclusion within mainstream educational settings (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Deng & Zhu, 2016).

This distinction is particularly important in China, where Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) has expanded opportunities for students with disabilities to enter mainstream schools. Yet increasing placement alone does not ensure meaningful inclusion. The quality of inclusion also depends on whether students can access classroom communication, engage with curriculum and assessment, participate in peer and school life, and receive appropriate support from teachers and school leaders (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Li et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2018).

The concept of meaningful inclusion developed in this paper is intended to capture these broader conditions. The proposed ARPR framework organizes them through four interrelated dimensions: Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness. Together, these dimensions provide a basis for examining whether mainstream placement is educationally substantive rather than merely physical. The following sections develop the policy, institutional, and pedagogical foundations of this framework (Florian, 2014; Haug, 2017).

3. Inclusive Education in China: Policy Background and Continuing Challenges

China has made substantial progress in expanding educational access for students with disabilities. Since the late twentieth century, the Learning in

Regular Classrooms (LRC) approach has become an important mechanism for increasing participation in mainstream schools, particularly where specialized provision is limited. Subsequent reforms in compulsory education, disability legislation, and national development planning have further strengthened the policy commitment to inclusive education and broader educational rights (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Deng & Zhu, 2007; General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China [GOSC], 2021; United Nations, 2006).

Despite this progress, implementation remains uneven. A first challenge concerns differences in institutional capacity across regions, schools, and disability groups. Schools vary considerably in access to trained staff, specialist services, assistive technologies, and family or community resources. These differences mean that students with disabilities may experience very different forms of inclusion depending on location, school type, age level, and support needs. Inclusion therefore cannot be understood solely through national policy commitments; it must also be examined through the local capacity to translate those commitments into practice (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Deng & Zhu, 2016; Li et al., 2025).

A second challenge concerns the relationship between standardized schooling and pedagogical responsiveness. Chinese schooling has traditionally placed strong emphasis on curriculum coverage, efficiency, and examination performance. These features can create tensions for inclusion when common standards are interpreted as requiring uniform delivery. Students with disabilities may need flexible pacing, accessible materials, differentiated instruction, communication support, or alternative ways of demonstrating learning. At the same time, many teachers report limited preparation or confidence in meeting diverse learning needs, particularly when class sizes are large and specialist support is limited. Inclusive practice therefore depends not only on teacher willingness but also on professional knowledge, time, and institutional support (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Li et al., 2025; Ministry of

Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

A third challenge concerns school organization, culture, and the quality of participation after placement. Inclusion is often treated as a classroom issue, yet many of its enabling conditions are organizational. Leadership decisions influence resource allocation, collaboration, professional learning, assessment flexibility, and school climate. Social attitudes also matter: students with disabilities may experience stigma, low expectations, overprotection, or limited peer interaction even when they are formally enrolled in mainstream settings. For this reason, evaluating inclusion mainly through placement figures risks overlooking whether students actually participate, learn, communicate, and experience belonging (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Haug, 2017; Koster et al., 2010; Sider et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025).

These challenges should not be interpreted as evidence that centralized policy is inherently incompatible with inclusion. Centralized systems can establish minimum entitlements, mobilize resources, and legitimize reform. The central issue is how national goals are interpreted and enacted within schools. In China, meaningful inclusion therefore depends on the interaction among policy expectations, school capacity, teacher practice, and student experience (GOSC, 2021; General Office of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOEGO], 2016; MOE, 2022).

The following sections examine three institutional domains through which these tensions become visible in everyday practice: language and communication, curriculum and assessment, and school leadership. Together, these domains help explain why placement may or may not develop into meaningful inclusion and provide the institutional foundation for the ARPR framework developed later in the paper.

4. Language and Communication as Foundations of Inclusive Participation

Language and communication are fundamental conditions of participation in schooling. Teachers explain, question, guide, and assess through

communication, while students use communication to demonstrate understanding, seek support, interact with peers, and exercise voice. For students with disabilities, barriers to speech, hearing, processing, comprehension, expression, or social communication can therefore restrict not only classroom interaction but also access to learning and belonging (CAST, 2018; United Nations, 2006).

Communication should consequently be understood as an accessibility issue rather than as a peripheral instructional concern. Physical access to a classroom does not guarantee educational access if students cannot understand classroom discourse or express what they know. Communicative accessibility requires flexibility in how information is presented and how students are permitted to respond. This may include clearer explanations, visual or multimodal support, alternative forms of expression, and sufficient processing time. The central principle is that participation should not depend on a single communicative mode (CAST, 2018; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

This principle is particularly relevant in Chinese mainstream classrooms, where instruction is often shaped by standardized curricular language, teacher-led routines, and relatively rapid whole-class pacing. In such environments, communication difficulties may be mistaken for low ability, disengagement, or lack of effort when the actual barrier lies in processing demands, linguistic complexity, or limited opportunities for supported response (Li et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2018). Inclusive practice therefore requires teachers to distinguish learner difficulty from barriers created by the communicative design of the classroom.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides one useful approach to this problem. UDL encourages educational environments to offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression rather than assuming that one form of explanation or response will suit all learners. For students with disabilities, this approach can increase access while also benefiting a broader range of learners by

embedding flexibility into ordinary teaching rather than relying exclusively on individual accommodations after difficulties emerge (AlRawi & AlKahtani, 2022; CAST, 2018).

Communication is also central to recognition and participation. Students are not fully included when adults communicate about them without creating meaningful opportunities to communicate with them. Inclusion requires students to express preferences, demonstrate understanding, participate in decisions, and interact with peers in ways that are taken seriously. Student voice therefore has both pedagogical and relational significance, because it influences whether learners are recognized as full members of the educational community rather than passive recipients of support (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Koster et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2025). At the school level, communicative inclusion depends on professional and organizational support. Teachers need knowledge of accessible communication strategies, but they also need collaboration with special educators, support staff, and families, together with a school culture that legitimizes flexible practice. Leadership is therefore important in ensuring that communicative accessibility is treated as part of ordinary instructional quality rather than as an optional accommodation for a small number of students (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sider et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

In summary, communication is a foundational condition of meaningful inclusion because it shapes whether students can access learning, participate in interaction, express themselves, and experience recognition. Within the ARPR framework, communication therefore contributes directly to Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness, linking classroom practice with the broader institutional conditions of inclusion.

5. Curriculum, Assessment, and Access to Powerful Knowledge

Curriculum and assessment shape the structure of educational opportunity. Curriculum defines what knowledge and skills are valued, while assessment determines how learning is

recognized and rewarded. For students with disabilities, both can either expand or restrict inclusion. When curricular goals are delivered rigidly or assessment depends on narrow standardized formats, students may be present in mainstream classrooms but remain excluded from meaningful learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Inclusive curriculum should therefore balance shared educational entitlement with flexible access. Adaptation does not mean abandoning common educational aims or lowering expectations. Rather, it involves adjusting materials, pacing, task design, scaffolding, or modes of participation so that students can engage with valued learning. This is especially important because access to what Young (2013) describes as “powerful knowledge” should not be reserved for learners who can succeed through a single instructional route. Students with disabilities should have access to intellectually meaningful content, but that access must be pedagogically achievable (Florian, 2014; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Young, 2013).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a useful framework for this purpose. By encouraging multiple means of representation, engagement, and action or expression, UDL shifts attention from fitting students into a fixed instructional design toward anticipating learner variability from the outset. In this sense, UDL and curriculum adaptation are complementary rather than separate strategies: both seek to preserve important learning goals while increasing the number of routes through which students can participate and demonstrate understanding (AlRawi & AlKahtani, 2022; CAST, 2018).

Flexible curriculum design can also be supported by pedagogical approaches that combine cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions of learning. For example, Chen et al. (2026) found that an agent-based simulation approach integrating these dimensions was associated with students’ motivation and science achievement. Although the study was not conducted specifically in inclusive education, it illustrates the

broader value of designing learning experiences through multiple forms of engagement rather than relying on a single instructional format.

Assessment raises similar concerns. Standardized assessment may provide comparability and system coherence, but it can disadvantage learners when one mode of performance is treated as equivalent to learning itself. Inclusive assessment therefore requires flexibility in how evidence of learning is gathered, including the use of formative assessment, adapted tasks, supported responses, and alternative forms of demonstration where appropriate. The aim is not to remove rigor, but to ensure that assessment reflects learning rather than unnecessary barriers in format or timing (CAST, 2018; Florian, 2014).

These issues are particularly important in China, where curriculum reform has increasingly emphasized competency and holistic development while schools continue to operate under substantial examination pressure. For students with disabilities, this tension can weaken the incentive for differentiation and flexible assessment, especially when teachers are expected to maintain common pacing and are judged through aggregate performance indicators. Inclusion may then become largely nominal: students are placed in regular classrooms, but access to curriculum remains incomplete (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Li et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2018). Curriculum and assessment also depend on school organization. Teachers need time to plan adaptations, interpret learner progress, collaborate with support staff, and implement assessment accommodations consistently. Without clear organizational support, adaptation may remain fragmented and dependent on individual teacher effort. School leadership therefore plays an important role in determining whether inclusive curriculum and assessment become established practices rather than isolated accommodations (DeMatthews et al., 2020; General Office of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [MOEGO], 2016). In summary, curriculum and assessment support meaningful inclusion when they combine high expectations with flexible access and multiple ways of demonstrating learning. They undermine

inclusion when uniformity is treated as fairness and when standardized performance becomes the only legitimate indicator of achievement. Within the ARPR framework, curriculum and assessment therefore shape Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness by influencing what students are able to learn, how their capabilities are interpreted, and how schools adapt to learner diversity.

6. School Leadership as the Meso-Level Infrastructure of Inclusion

School leadership plays a critical meso-level role in inclusive education because leaders connect system-level policy expectations with the organizational and pedagogical realities of schools. Inclusion is not implemented automatically through policy declaration. Its realization depends on how schools interpret expectations, organize resources, support teachers, and shape the conditions under which students with disabilities participate in everyday school life (DeMatthews et al., 2020, 2026; Sider et al., 2021).

The first leadership mechanism is policy mediation. Educational policies typically establish broad goals and requirements, but they rarely specify every aspect of implementation. School leaders therefore interpret, prioritize, and translate policy within local conditions. In inclusive education, this distinction is especially important. A compliance-oriented interpretation may emphasize enrollment figures, documentation, or procedural completion, whereas a more educationally responsive interpretation asks whether students with disabilities are able to access learning, participate meaningfully, and receive appropriate support. Leadership therefore shapes whether inclusion remains administratively visible or becomes educationally substantive (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Mavrogordato & White, 2020). The second mechanism is organizational capacity. Meaningful inclusion depends on resources, professional knowledge, time, and institutional coordination. Leaders influence staffing, scheduling, specialist support, professional development, and the allocation of assistive or instructional resources.

They also determine whether teachers have opportunities to build confidence in differentiated instruction, communication support, flexible assessment, and collaborative planning. In this sense, teacher willingness alone is insufficient; inclusive practice requires organizational conditions that make responsive teaching feasible and sustainable (DeMatthews et al., 2020, 2026; Sider et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Professional capacity also has a psychological dimension. Although Akhter (2026) focuses on EFL teachers rather than inclusive education specifically, the review highlights teacher well-being, burnout, and teaching anxiety as important conditions of professional practice. This insight is relevant to inclusive reform because expectations for differentiation, collaboration, and individualized support may become difficult to sustain when teachers experience persistent professional strain. Leadership for inclusion should therefore attend not only to knowledge and skills but also to the organizational conditions that support sustainable professional practice. The third mechanism is inclusive culture and collaboration. Leaders influence how disability and learner diversity are understood within the school community. Through everyday decisions, public language, professional expectations, and responses to exclusion, they can either normalize diversity or reinforce deficit-oriented assumptions. Inclusive leadership also depends on collaboration among general teachers, special educators, support staff, families, and other professionals. Such coordination requires deliberate structures rather than reliance on informal goodwill. When collaboration is institutionalized, support is more likely to become coherent and shared; when it is absent, responsibility may become fragmented or concentrated on individual teachers (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sider et al., 2021).

These leadership mechanisms are especially significant in centralized and policy-intensive contexts such as China, where school leaders must reconcile inclusive policy goals with examination pressure, teacher workload, resource

constraints, and local expectations. Such tensions do not make leadership irrelevant; they make mediation more important. Leaders influence how competing priorities are framed and whether schools respond through rigid compliance or contextual adaptation. However, leadership should not be idealized as a substitute for structural support. Regional disparities, resource shortages, and policy contradictions cannot be resolved by individual leaders alone (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China [GOSC], 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

Inclusive leadership is therefore best understood as both positional and distributed. Principals matter, but inclusive practice also depends on middle leaders, special education personnel, classroom teachers, and other professionals who contribute to collective problem-solving. Culturally responsive and socially just leadership perspectives further emphasize that leaders should evaluate not only whether organizational goals are achieved, but also whose opportunities are expanded or constrained by school practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2022).

In summary, school leadership functions as the meso-level infrastructure of meaningful inclusion through three interconnected processes: policy mediation, organizational capacity building, and the development of inclusive culture and collaboration. These processes shape whether inclusive education remains nominal or becomes embedded in school practice. Within the ARPR framework, leadership is particularly important for Responsiveness, while also influencing the conditions under which Access, Recognition, and Participation can be sustained.

7. The ARPR Framework: Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness

The preceding sections have shown that inclusive education cannot be adequately understood through placement alone. To address this limitation, this paper proposes the ARPR framework, which conceptualizes meaningful inclusion through four interrelated dimensions:

Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness. These dimensions describe different but connected aspects of students' educational experience and the institutional conditions that make inclusion meaningful (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2014). Access refers to the extent to which students can enter, reach, perceive, and use educational opportunities. It includes not only school enrollment and physical accessibility, but also access to classroom communication, learning materials, curriculum, assessment accommodations, assistive technologies, and specialist support. Physical presence without access to these educational resources represents only partial inclusion (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2006). Recognition concerns whether learner diversity is treated as legitimate within the school community. It involves both formal acknowledgement of disability-related rights and everyday attitudes toward students with disabilities. Recognition is present when students are viewed as full members of the educational community whose identities, abilities, needs, and voices are respected. Where students are tolerated but primarily framed as deficient, burdensome, or exceptional, inclusion remains incomplete (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Participation refers to active engagement in academic and social life. It includes involvement in learning tasks, interaction with peers, participation in school activities, opportunities to communicate and make choices, and the ability to exercise voice. Participation therefore distinguishes substantive inclusion from nominal placement: students may be physically present and formally accepted while still remaining peripheral to classroom learning or peer relationships (Koster et al., 2010; Li et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Responsiveness refers to the capacity of schools to adapt pedagogy, assessment, resources, and organizational arrangements in response to learner diversity. It includes differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, communication support, collaborative planning, individualized support, and appropriate allocation of personnel and resources. Responsiveness shifts attention from whether students can adapt to existing school

routines toward whether schools can adjust those routines when barriers arise (CAST, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2022). The four dimensions are analytically distinct but mutually dependent. Access without recognition may result in students being admitted while remaining culturally marginalized. Recognition without participation may become symbolic if students are valued rhetorically but have limited involvement in learning and school life. Participation without responsiveness may depend excessively on individual teacher effort and therefore remain fragile. Conversely, responsiveness has limited value if students lack access to the educational opportunities that such adaptations are intended to support. Meaningful inclusion is strongest when all four dimensions reinforce one another (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014). The framework also integrates the three institutional domains examined earlier in the paper. Language and communication influence whether students can access instruction, express themselves, be recognized, and participate. Curriculum and assessment determine access to valued knowledge, the ways learner capability is recognized, and the flexibility available for demonstrating learning. School leadership shapes the organizational conditions under which these forms of responsiveness can be sustained. ARPR therefore does not add a separate layer to the analysis; it organizes the mechanisms through

which meaningful inclusion is produced across classroom and school levels (CAST, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020). ARPR can serve as both an analytical and practical lens. Researchers and schools can examine four questions: whether educational opportunities are accessible, whether learner diversity is recognized as legitimate, whether students participate meaningfully, and whether schools respond flexibly when barriers emerge. This shifts evaluation beyond binary classifications of inclusive versus non-inclusive schooling toward the quality of inclusion across different learners and settings (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2014; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; MOE, 2022). In China, the ARPR framework is particularly relevant because it shifts attention from the numerical expansion of mainstream placement toward the quality of inclusion after placement. It connects disability inclusion with broader concerns about educational equity, school leadership, curriculum accessibility, and policy implementation. The framework does not resolve all debates surrounding disability categories, specialist provision, or the balance between mainstream and specialized support. Rather, it offers a parsimonious way to examine whether students with disabilities are able to access learning, be recognized, participate meaningfully, and encounter schools capable of responding to diversity (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Haug, 2017; Li et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2020).

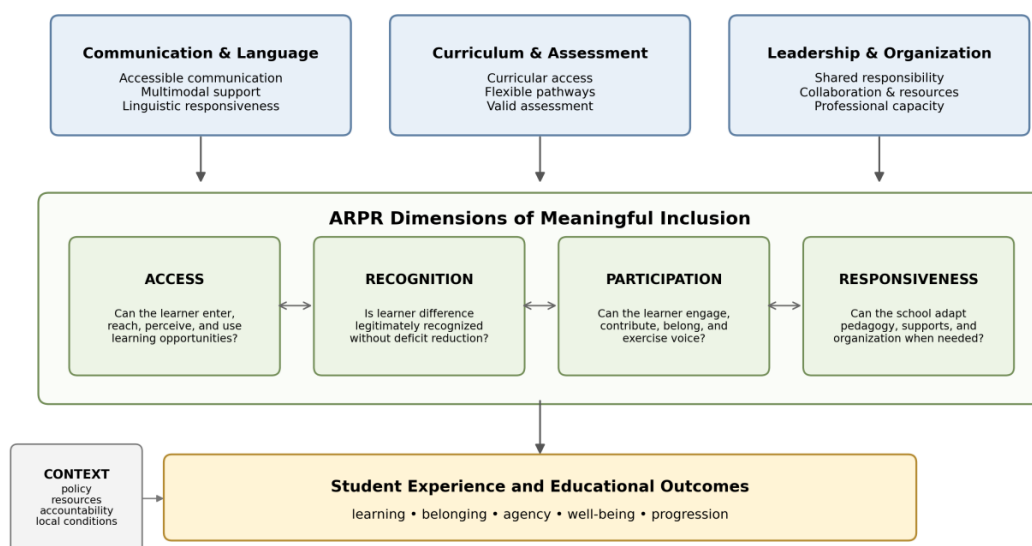


Figure 1 The ARPR Framework for Meaningful Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Figure 1 summarizes the ARPR framework and illustrates how language and communication, curriculum and assessment, and school leadership shape the four dimensions of

meaningful inclusion. The relationships are presented as interconnected rather than sequential, reflecting the relational and dynamic nature of inclusive education.

Table 1 Indicative School-Level Indicators for Evaluating Meaningful Inclusion Using the ARPR Framework

Dimension	Core Question	Indicative Evidence
Access	Can learners use educational opportunities?	Accessible materials, communication, supports
Recognition	Is learner diversity treated as legitimate?	Respect, voice, anti-stigma
Participation	Can learners engage and belong?	Learning, peer interaction, choice
Responsiveness	Can the school adapt when barriers arise?	Flexible pedagogy, assessment, resources

8. Implications for Policy, Leadership, and Classroom Practice

At the policy level, the ARPR framework suggests that inclusive education should be evaluated through more than placement or enrollment in regular classrooms. Policy monitoring should also consider communicative accessibility, participation, access to support, curriculum and assessment flexibility, and the capacity of schools to respond to learner diversity. Inclusion is unlikely to become meaningful if schools are required to accept students with disabilities without corresponding investment in teacher preparation, specialist support, collaboration time, and clear procedures for curriculum adaptation and assessment accommodation. Policy should therefore distinguish between shared educational entitlement and uniform delivery, treating flexibility as a means of enabling quality rather than as a lowering of standards (CAST, 2018; Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Haug, 2017; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

At the school leadership level, inclusion should be treated as a whole-school responsibility rather than a task assigned primarily to individual special

education teachers. Leaders influence whether inclusive goals are embedded in school planning, resource allocation, professional learning, collaboration, and school culture. They also shape how disability is understood within the school community and whether students with disabilities are recognized as legitimate members rather than as exceptional cases or management problems. Building coherent structures for collaboration among general teachers, special educators, support personnel, and families can strengthen responsiveness and reduce reliance on isolated individual effort (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; DeMatthews et al., 2020, 2026; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sider et al., 2021).

At the classroom level, meaningful inclusion requires communicative, curricular, and assessment practices that anticipate learner variability. Teachers can broaden access through clear and multimodal communication, flexible task design, scaffolded materials, differentiated instruction, and multiple ways of demonstrating learning. Assessment should combine summative requirements with formative and flexible approaches that allow evidence of progress to be recognized appropriately. Inclusion also depends on social participation: students with disabilities need opportunities to interact with peers,

contribute to classroom activities, exercise voice, and experience belonging. These practices reinforce the broader principle that inclusion is not a technical add-on to ordinary schooling, but part of how educational quality, equity, and professionalism are understood (Ainscow, 2020; CAST, 2018; Koster et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2020; Wang et al., 2025).

9. Future Research Directions and Limitations

Because this article is conceptual rather than empirical, the ARPR framework should be treated as an interpretive and practical lens that requires further examination in real educational settings. Future research could test how Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness are manifested across different Chinese schools, regions, disability categories, and educational levels. Particular attention should be given to students' own experiences, as well as to the mechanisms through which school leadership, teacher collaboration, resource allocation, and institutional culture shape inclusive outcomes. Research should also examine how disability intersects with language background, family resources, migrant status, and regional inequality, since barriers to inclusion rarely operate in isolation (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Li et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022, 2025).

The main limitation of this paper lies in the breadth of its integrative review. By bringing together scholarship on disability, communication, curriculum, assessment, leadership, and the Chinese LRC context, the review supports conceptual integration but cannot provide the depth of a systematic review or substitute for detailed empirical analysis of particular populations and settings. The ARPR framework should therefore be understood as a starting point for further theoretical refinement and contextually grounded empirical research

rather than as a fully validated model (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

10. Conclusion

This paper has argued that inclusive education in China should be understood as more than the placement of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Placement is an important condition of inclusion, but meaningful inclusion also depends on whether students can access learning, be recognized as legitimate members of the school community, participate actively in academic and social life, and receive appropriate institutional and pedagogical responses. On this basis, the paper proposed the ARPR framework—Access, Recognition, Participation, and Responsiveness—as an integrated lens for evaluating the quality of inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014; Haug, 2017).

The framework also highlights three institutional domains through which inclusion is enacted: language and communication, curriculum and assessment, and school leadership. Communicative accessibility affects whether students can understand, express themselves, and participate; curriculum and assessment determine access to valued learning and the recognition of achievement; and leadership shapes whether schools develop the resources, professional capacity, and organizational flexibility needed to respond to learner diversity (CAST, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020).

For China, the next challenge is therefore not only to expand mainstream placement but also to deepen the quality of inclusion after placement. The broader contribution of ARPR is to connect disability inclusion with educational equity, school quality, and institutional responsiveness, offering a framework for examining whether schools are capable of supporting students with disabilities to access, belong, participate, and learn meaningfully (Li et al., 2025; MOE, 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

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Author Declaration

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