

# From collaboration to policy: critical perspectives on inclusive research and inclusive education in addressing educational inequality

*Rong Cheng*

Anshun University, Anshun, China

1310753957@qq.com

---

**Abstract.** Evidence-based practice highlights the need to connect research with professional practice, positioning practitioners as active agents of change. Inclusive research and inclusive education share this commitment to collaboration and social justice. This study draws on a review of key literature and international policy examples from Thailand and Iceland to examine how inclusive research fosters collaboration with marginalised groups and how inclusive education has influenced equitable legislation. Inclusive approaches have reshaped researcher–participant dynamics, contributed to anti-discriminatory policies, and supported the development of fully inclusive education systems. When applied to educational inequality among ethnic minorities in China, persistent gaps remain in resources, policy implementation, and responsiveness to minority students' needs. Inclusive research and education offer a coherent framework for advancing equity, provided that policy development is grounded in participatory evidence and teaching practices are adapted to the diverse learning characteristics of minority students.

**Keywords:** inclusive research, inclusive education, educational inequality, ethnic minorities

---

## 1. Introduction

Evidence-based practice put forward that there must be a clear link between professional practice and research. This type of practice has three components. The first part is the most important part, that is, research should provide a theoretical basis for practice, the second part is that practice services need to be changed based on valid research evidence, and the last part is that practitioners need to monitor the effectiveness of interventions by evaluating the services [1]. These scholars believed that the connection between professional practice and research should be realized by carrying out practitioner research. In response to the development of evidence-based practice, practitioners were encouraged to participate more actively in research and practitioner research emerged. Practitioner Research as a new change in professional learning is important in the field of education. Its key feature is that it views practitioners as agents of Educational Change [2], this kind of research requires practitioners to see themselves as empowered and active change agents, so that the practice of change can be made for marginalized students [3]. As one of the practitioners' studies, inclusive research has made significant

contributions to education policies and practices. Therefore, this essay takes inclusive research and inclusive education as the research objects for critical analysis.

## **2. The contribution of inclusive research and inclusive education to practice and policy**

Inclusive research is regarded by scholars as a study that changes the relationship between researchers and research objects [4] and Walmsley [5] put forward that inclusive research usually targets the socially excluded groups, such as disabled people, LGBT people and others who are not accepted by the society. Nind [6] concluded from the research analysis of a large number of scholars that inclusive research is a kind of research carried out with or by the research object, rather than just for the research object. This research method emphasizes cooperation and respects different cognitive modes, with the purpose of realizing social transformation. The core idea of inclusive research is to break the limits of hierarchy, maximize capacity and remove barriers to participation, and improve the authenticity of results. These core concepts are more obvious in practice. In the literature, MacLeod et al. [7] proposed to find effective ways to solve obstacles through cooperation with research objects, so as to help autistic people overcome the obstacles of participation. The researchers reflected on a study of students with autism, thinking that their lack of social skills and the social ostracism they may experience might affect their participation in the study, the study was conducted in conjunction with people with autism using interpretive analysis. In the study, scholars first identified potential obstacles for autistic patients when participating, including their anxiety about communication and interviews, and possible problems with poor expression. The participants were then given options to solve the problem, such as choosing between telephone communication, face-to-face communication or real-time online interviews, so that the autistic participants could participate in the study in the most relaxed way. In this practice, the researchers not only required the participants to conform to the researcher's hypothesis, but also to find a balance between commitment and need for the participants, emphasizing the importance of working with the study subjects by enhancing the participation of the autistic patients. In addition, Nind also proposed that the peak of inclusive research is led by non-professional researchers. Therefore, in a research project led by the LGBT community, researchers have participated in cooperation since the initial design research, and the purpose is to empower socially excluded and marginalized LGBT people while contributing to those in power [8]. Researchers collaborate with stakeholders (such as LGBT population) to collect useful data to blur and eliminate the boundaries between community members, researchers, and LGBT groups, and to bridge the gap between society and excluded populations. Browne et al. therefore reflected the importance of cooperation between marginalized groups and those in power to influence social change through this research practice conducted by LGBT community leaders. All of these practices show that inclusive research makes the research more cooperative by criticizing the relationship between the researcher and the research object.

Inclusive research, as a cognitive way to pay attention to social justice, has been receiving increasing attention in the field of education [9]. When analyzing its contribution to education policy, it is natural to link it with inclusive education, a teaching way that pays attention to social justice [10]. Inclusive research and inclusive education share the same ideological and theoretical basis, and their main purpose is to break down the barriers to inclusion and promote the participation and cooperation of excluded and marginalized groups [11]. Take Thailand as an example, under the influence of inclusive research and education, the development of its education field has gradually formed certain regional characteristics and formulated relevant education policies. *Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons Act* [12] is the first law issued in Thailand specifically aimed at improving the degree of participation and equal rights of persons with disabilities. It stipulated that persons

with disabilities are eligible for basic education, vocational education and higher education based on national education programs. This policy also proposed the establishment of a National Disability Rehabilitation Commission to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities through medical and vocational education and training, which initially reflects the impact of inclusive research and inclusive education on Thai education policy. Subsequently, *National Education Act* [13] clearly stated that all Thai citizens enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and each citizen is provided with free basic education for no less than 12 years. In addition, this policy stipulates that every school should provide special children (regardless of severity) with the opportunity to enter and be included in ordinary school classrooms. It also stipulated that schools should provide special education for special children according to their own needs. The formulation of this policy guarantees the right of special groups to receive education and is a further practice of inclusive research and education. *Compulsory Education Act* [14] stipulated in more detail that the Ministry of Education, local administrations and educational institutions should specifically organize and conduct education for children with intellectual, emotional or social disabilities, as well as children who cannot take care of themselves and are unattended. And through appropriate teaching methods to allow them to receive compulsory education, provide services and assistance according to their needs, to ensure that these marginalized children enjoy equal compulsory education rights and opportunities, so as to achieve inclusive education. Finally, *Education Provision for Persons with Disabilities Act* [15] emphasized the various rights of the disabled in the aspect of education (including receive free education, according to their own abilities and interests to choose form of education, as well as on the standard and quality of equality to accept education), the policy is put forward in the field of education in Thailand for the first time to give the disabled the option, so they can decide to accept the form of education, this is the final embodiment of comprehensive education in policy making.

The contribution of inclusive research and inclusive education to policy and practice is not only reflected in a certain country, this influence is globalized. In 1994, UNESCO put forward the concept of "inclusive education" in The Salamanca Statement, how to integrate learners with special educational needs into ordinary schools has become a concern of all countries in the world. Affected by this declaration, Iceland issued *The Plays-School Act* in the same year, which stipulates that all pre-school education institutions must provide assistance to special children under six years of age. In 1999, National Curriculum Guide for Senior Middle Schools was issued to require high schools to provide students with special teaching units to meet the needs of special students [16]. After entering the 21st century, inclusive research and education have made more obvious contributions to Iceland's education field. Iceland requires that the whole society should respect the value of everyone so as to maintain social justice, guarantee everyone equal opportunities and provide everyone with appropriate education [17]. Therefore, *Compulsory Education Act* was amended in 2001, which stipulated that the special classes with the nature of segregation should be stopped in ordinary schools, and the education model of complete inclusion should be implemented. This policy was finally launched with the active promotion of the National Teachers Union [18]. In addition, in order to build a fully inclusive education system, Iceland issued New Education Acts of Law in 2008, which stipulated that schools should provide 10 years of compulsory education for all children aged 6-16 years, and provide one-to-one instruction for students with special educational needs to help excluded students integrate into regular classroom learning [19]. According to EU statistics in 2014, Iceland's inclusive education policy is effective, which basically realized the inclusive education goal of special groups and general groups to learn together and completes the construction of inclusive education system [18].

### **3. How can inclusive research and education improve the educational inequality of ethnic minorities in China**

As a basic human right, the right to education makes education equity become a highly concerned issue. A large number of studies have proved that inequality in education will lead to a series of adverse consequences such as widening income distribution gap, slow economic growth and social class antagonism [20]. At present, the inequality in education in China is widespread in education at all levels and among all kinds of people, and the education imbalance is mainly manifested in the Han nationality regions and minority nationality regions, including all levels from compulsory education to higher education [21]. Since most ethnic minority residents live in rural or remote areas, and their economic development is relatively backward, their educational level is generally not high, most of the important educational indicators (such as educational funds, teaching instruments and teaching materials) in the minority areas have obviously gap with those in the Han areas, minority students are also generally less educated than Han students [22]. As far as China's current development is concerned, the realization of educational equity for Ethnic Minorities will not only reduce people's discrimination against ethnic minority students, but also be conducive to the implementation and enforcement of ethnic education policies, safeguard ethnic minority groups and legitimate rights and interests, and build socialist ethnic relations of equality, harmony and mutual assistance [23]. Therefore, this part will generate evidence through inclusive research and inclusive education, and propose improvements to the problem of educational inequality of ethnic minorities in China.

Scholars argued that fairness in education is about removing barriers that may prevent students from becoming what they can be, and helping all students gain opportunities to truly participate fully [24]. Inclusive research and inclusive education, as a method to support and welcome the diversity of all learners, emphasize respect for different cognitive styles with strong inclusiveness [11], are the best theoretical basis for promoting the inequity of ethnic minority education in China. In this improvement practice, researchers should first understand the basic situation of stakeholders (mainly minority students) and consider their actual situation and ideas. For many ethnic minority students, regional economic constraints have led to a shortage of educational resources and a weak teaching force. Their educational opportunities and enrolment rates are consistently lower than the average level of Han students, there are also inequalities in outcomes after education (such as poor basic education and neglect of higher education counselling and support for ethnic minority students). At the same time, due to the lack of implementation of education policies related to ethnic minorities (such as bilingual education), it is difficult for ethnic minority students to truly integrate into and participate in the learning life of ordinary schools. In this process of collecting relevant data and information, researchers should collaborate with or be led by minority students, rather than simply analyzing the subjects. One appropriate method is the use of questionnaires, a widely recognised research tool for capturing participants' thoughts, attitudes, and experiences [25]. In the context of inclusive research, questionnaires can be designed to include open-ended questions that allow minority students to express their preferred forms of education and the types of support they seek, thereby reinforcing the participatory role of research subjects. Researchers can conduct research on the education level and ability of minority students and the tolerance of Han students on them through questionnaires. The questionnaire should also design several open-ended questions to allow minority students to express their thoughts about the form of education they wish to receive and the help they want to obtain, so as to strengthen the participation and dominance of the research subjects. In this way, the research data and information obtained by the researchers are more authentic, and it is more conducive to promoting the equitable development of minority education.

Secondly, if researchers want to improve educational practice, they should also consider the aim of inclusive education and the audience of inclusive research results. Inclusive education is not only about integrating a subset of students with special needs into the mainstream, but is primarily about enabling teachers and students to embrace diversity as an opportunity, treat equity and equality as the core and foundation, and truly embody the equality of education through joint participation [26]. And the audience of inclusive research is the marginalized group, the research process needs to consider the needs of the research object. Therefore, the key to promoting equity in the education of ethnic minorities in China is to pay maximum attention to the needs of students in research, including general needs, individual needs, and special needs [27]. The "Study follow the regular class" approach to education in China played an important role in popularizing the compulsory education, but the direct placement of socially excluded groups of students (such as ethnic minority students) in regular classes does not mean that their needs are being met, there is also a need to take into account the different educational level and acceptance ability of minority students [28]. Therefore, when applying inclusive education to the education of ethnic minorities, it is necessary to fully understand the learning characteristics and learning ability of ethnic minority students, and provide them with targeted counseling and guidance according to the diversity of students' needs and the multiplicity of learning objectives, so as to develop an education plan suitable for the development of ethnic minority students. For example, schools in ethnic minority areas should be guided by the principles of inclusive education (equity and equality), combined with the actual education status of local ethnic minority students to design courses suitable for the joint learning and development of Han and minority students. And according to the specific situation of ethnic minority students, try to carry out covertly stratified teaching with inclusive education with their own national characteristics, and strive to meet the diverse needs of various students and avoid the rejection of ethnic minority students, so as to improve the unfair education situation in ethnic minority areas [28]. Finally, inclusive research should consider equity and social justice when formulating relevant education policies. The biggest influencing factor for the unfair education of ethnic minorities in China is the inadequacy of the relevant legal system. Since China has not yet had an ethnic education law that can truly reflect the characteristics of ethnic regions and ethnic education, many problems in the special field of minority education are lack of clear laws and regulations, and various preferential measures and rights determined by the policy of minority education are difficult to be implemented in teaching practice [29]. Some scholars have pointed out that every policy formulation requires effective use of research, this kind of policy based on research evidence can help solve seemingly complex public problems [30]. As a cognitive approach focusing on social justice, inclusion studies emphasize the values of equal opportunity and social respect [31]. Using the data and information collected by such research (such as the education methods and help that minority students want mentioned above) as a reference for relevant policy development will help deepen the reform of ethnic education and improve minority educational laws and regulations (including clarifying the educational goals of ethnic minority areas, guaranteeing the right to education of ethnic minority students, and providing sufficient and excellent teaching resources for ethnic minority areas), thereby improving the current situation of unfair education of ethnic minorities in China.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Evidence-based practice aims to bridge the gap between research and practice by supporting informed decision-making [32]. As a key form of practitioner research, inclusive research has contributed significantly to educational policy and practice and offers a valuable theoretical framework for addressing educational inequality among ethnic minorities in China. Nevertheless, discrepancies persist between research findings

and their implementation in practice. Future research should focus on contextualised analysis of students' actual learning conditions and the effectiveness of inclusive teaching strategies to strengthen the application of research in professional practice [33].

## Funding project

2025 Youth Project of Anshun University (asxyqn202506)

## References

- [1] Fox, M., Green, G., & Martin, P. (2007). *Doing practitioner research*. Sage.
- [2] Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2015). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. Teachers College Press.
- [3] Allen, J. K. (2016). Practitioner Research: A "Refreshing Change" for Professional Learning. *ie: inquiry in education*, 8(2), 4.
- [4] Griffiths, M. (1998). Educational research for social justice: Getting off the fence. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- [5] Walmsley, J. (2004). Inclusive learning disability research: the (nondisabled) researcher's role. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32(2), 65-71.
- [6] Nind, M. (2014). *What is inclusive research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- [7] Macleod, A. G., Lewis, A., & Robertson, C. (2013). 'CHARLIE: PLEASE RESPOND!' Using a participatory methodology with individuals on the autism spectrum. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 37(4), 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2013.776528>.
- [8] Browne, K., Bakshi, L., & Lim, J. (2012). *There's no point in doing research if no one wants to listen. Identifying LGBT needs and effecting "positive social change" for LGBT people in Brighton and Hove*. In P. Beresford & S. Carr (Eds.), *Social care, service users and user involvement*, 205-225.
- [9] Cook, T. (2012). Where participatory approaches meet pragmatism in funded (Health) research: The challenge of finding meaningful spaces, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1). Art. 18. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1201187>
- [10] Clough, P. (2005). *Exclusive tendencies: Concepts, consciousness and curriculum in the project of inclusion*. In M. Nind, J. Rix, K. Sheehy, & K. Simmons (Eds.), *Curriculum and pedagogy in inclusive education* (pp. 73–81). Abingdon: Routledge Falmer.
- [11] Nind, M. (2014). Inclusive research and inclusive education: why connecting them makes sense for teachers' and learners' democratic development of education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 44(4), 525-540.
- [12] Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons Act, B.E.2534. (1991). Retrieved from <https://dredf.org/legal-advocacy/international-disability-rights/international-laws/thailand-rehabilitation-of-disabled-persons-act/>
- [13] National Education Act, B.E.2542. (1999). Retrieved from [http://thailaws.com/law/t\\_laws/tlaw0165a.pdf](http://thailaws.com/law/t_laws/tlaw0165a.pdf)
- [14] Compulsory Education Act, B.E. 2545. (2002). Retrieved from [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:zdxD7Ycyb-0J:www.thailandntr.com/en/trade-in-services/laws/organization/download/95%3Ffile%3DLaw\\_TIS\\_147\\_EN.pdf+&cd=1&hl=zh-CN&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=safari](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:zdxD7Ycyb-0J:www.thailandntr.com/en/trade-in-services/laws/organization/download/95%3Ffile%3DLaw_TIS_147_EN.pdf+&cd=1&hl=zh-CN&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=safari)
- [15] Education Provision for Persons with Disabilities Act, B.E. 2551. (2008). Retrieved from [http://web.krisdika.go.th/data/outsitedata/outside21/file/Education\\_Provision\\_for\\_Persons\\_with\\_Disabilities\\_Act\\_B\\_E\\_2551\\_\(2008\).pdf](http://web.krisdika.go.th/data/outsitedata/outside21/file/Education_Provision_for_Persons_with_Disabilities_Act_B_E_2551_(2008).pdf)
- [16] Island, M. O. M. (2012). *The Icelandic national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools: general section*.

- [17] Beach, D., Dovemark, M., Schwartz, A., & Öhrn, E. (2013). Complexities and contradictions of educational inclusion—A meta-ethnographic analysis. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 33(4), 254-268.
- [18] Creta, L. M. (2014). Special Education Today in Iceland. *Advances in Special Education*, 28(17), 431-469.
- [19] Bjarnason, D. S. (2013). Inclusive education. Examining equity on five continents. *Disability and Society*, (3), 428-431.
- [20] O'Neill, D. (1995). Education and income growth: Implications for cross-country inequality. *Journal of Political Economy*, 103(6), 1289-1301.
- [21] Wang, J. (2002). A new strategy for balanced development of education in western minority areas. *National Research*, 6, 9-17.
- [22] Li, J. (2007). *Countermeasures for the balanced development of education in northwest minority areas*.
- [23] Li, C. A., & Long, Y. W. (2013). A study on educational equity in ethnic areas — An empirical analysis based on the 2011 survey data of Guangxi. *National Research*, 5, 35-45.
- [24] Keddie, A. (2012). *Removing Barriers in Students' Lives: An International Perspective on Issues of Justice and Cultural Diversity*. In *Educating for Diversity and Social Justice* (pp. 20–44).
- [25] Bulmer, M., De Vaus, D. A., & Fielding, N. (2004). *Questionnaires*. SAGE.
- [26] Shen, L. J. (2016). Problems and countermeasures of integrated education in rural kindergartens from the perspective of inclusive education. *Journal of Ningbo Institute of Education*, 18(6), 104-107.
- [27] Benton, P., & O'Brien, T. (2000). *Special needs and the beginning teacher*. Continuum.
- [28] Liu, X. Y., & Li, B. (2019). From idea to practice: Some enlightenments from the development of inclusive education in Tibet. *Journal of Tibet University (Social Science Edition)*, (3), 30.
- [29] Zhou, X. Y., & Zhang, T. T. (2015). Some understandings and reflections on the current situation of minority education in minority areas. *Knowledge and Economy*, (18), 164-165.
- [30] Stoker, G., & Evans, M. (2016). *Conclusion: Connecting social science and policy*. In *Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences: Methods that Matter* (pp. 263–270). Policy Press.
- [31] Norwich, B. (2013). *Addressing tensions and dilemmas in inclusive education: Living with uncertainty*. Routledge.
- [32] Gambrill, E. (2011). Evidence-based practice and the ethics of discretion. *Journal of Social Work*, 11(1), 26-48.
- [33] Guldberg, K. (2017). Evidence-based practice in autism educational research: Can we bridge the research and practice gap? *Oxford Review of Education*, 43(2), 149-161.