

Inclusive Education under Resource Constraints: Bricolage as Practice by Multiple Actors in Chinese Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS:

Inclusive Education
Bricolage
Resource Constraints
Multiple Actors

CITATION:

Li, S., Muhd Khaizer, O., & Nor Wahiza, A. W. (2026). Inclusive Education under Resource Constraints: Bricolage as Practice by Multiple Actors in Chinese Public Schools. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(7), e004101. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i7.4101>

While challenges related to resource constraints in inclusive education are widely acknowledged, some schools have still achieved positive outcomes despite limited resources. This study investigated how multiple actors in Chinese public schools engage in bricolage practices to implement inclusive education under resource constraints. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study conducted interviews with two principals, two administrators, and three frontline teachers from two public middle schools and two public elementary schools. The findings revealed that principals, administrators, and teachers, operating within resource constraints, have developed position-specific bricolage practices that contribute to effective inclusive education delivery.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated grassroots adaptive practices of multi-level school actors in constrained inclusive education settings.

1. Introduction

The Inclusive education concept has garnered broad international consensus, and related practices have been continuously advanced. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), issued by UNESCO, was the first major international document to systematically advocate that regular schools should accommodate all children, marking the transition of inclusive education from an ideal to policy-driven action. Over the subsequent decades, this concept has evolved substantially. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) established inclusive education as a fundamental human right. The Global Education Monitoring Report 2020, specifically its article Inclusion and education: All means all, not only reveals the stark reality that hundreds of millions of marginalized

children remain excluded from education globally, but also underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms in policy, curricula, teaching, and assessment. At the national level, provisions such as the Least Restrictive Environment principle in the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and the designation of Inclusion as the default option in the UK's Department for Education and Department of Health (2015) exemplify the firm commitment of various countries to the principles of inclusive education.

China has actively responded to this global trend by progressively establishing a policy framework for inclusive education that incorporates local characteristics. The Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities (1994) established the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) policy, providing the legal basis for students with special needs to attend regular schools. The Special Education Promotion Plan(2014-2016)(2014) was the first national policy document to explicitly use the term Inclusive Education. Most recently, the Action Plan for the Development and Enhancement of Special Education during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period (2022) has further called for expanding both the scope and depth of inclusive education. Through years of effort, the enrollment rate of children with disabilities in compulsory education has significantly increased, rising from 72% in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014) to over 95% in 2021 (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

However, in the process of advancing inclusive education, resource shortages have become a prominent constraint. Multiple policy documents have highlighted this issue. For instance, the Guidelines on the Construction of Special Education Resource Rooms in Regular Schools (2016) points out that resource rooms suffer from a weak foundation, insufficient numbers, poor equipment, and a shortage of teachers. The Guidance on Strengthening the Work of Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Compulsory Education (2020) emphasizes that inadequate support and guarantee conditions, insufficient construction of resource centers and resource rooms, and an urgent need to improve teachers' professional competence. The Action Plan for the Development and Enhancement of Special Education during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period (2022) also explicitly states that the allocation of special education resources is uneven, and the school conditions and teacher development in some regions lag behind. These difficulties have led to the phenomenon of being present but can not learning in practice.

Thus, a critical practical question emerges, under conditions of resource constraints, how do the multiple actors within schools actively propel forward the cause of inclusive education? Understanding this practical logic is the empirical starting point of this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Resource Constraints in Inclusive Education

Resource constraints have been widely recognized as a critical barrier to inclusive education (Floranza, 2025; Alcaraz et al., 2019; Chova & Manjinski, 2024; Wang & Yang, 2024). In addition to inadequate material and financial resources (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022; Orlunga, 2023), unclear policy guidelines and weak administrative support have also been identified as significant limitations (Orlunga, 2023; Hardy & Woodcock, 2023). Furthermore, human resource shortages constitute a crucial dimension, particularly the lack of specialized inclusive education personnel (Donath et al., 2023; Khamzina et al.,

2024). Due to constraints on their time and professional capacity, regular classroom teachers remain unable to effectively support the individualized development of students with special needs (DeMatthews et al., 2025).

Resource shortages are often regarded as a hard constraint hindering the progress of inclusive education. If resources are insufficient, the quality of inclusive education is considered difficult to guarantee (Ndlovu & Makofane, 2025; EDCOM 2, 2025). While this perspective is reasonable, it overlooks the complexity of concrete practices. Studies have found that schools facing similar resource constraints can exhibit marked differences in their inclusive education practices (Sturm, 2018; Ndlovu & Makofane, 2025; Makoelle & Malindi, 2025). Some schools, despite limited funding, a shortage of specialized teachers, and inadequate facilities, are nonetheless able to create relatively inclusive environments for students with special needs. In contrast, other schools, operating under similar resource constraints, can only place students in regular classrooms without truly providing individualized support (EDCOM 2, 2025; Sepadi, 2025; Deng, 2004).

This variation suggests that while resources are undeniably a significant constraining factor, they may not be the sole determinant of outcomes in inclusive education. Rather than reiterating the well-established fact of resource scarcity, a more profound question warrants investigation, given that resource constraints cannot be readily altered in the short term, what accounts for the discrepancies in performance among schools? This line of inquiry shifts the analytical focus from a deficit-oriented perspective, asking what is lacking, to a more nuanced exploration of practical processes, specifically, what do people do under conditions of resource constraints. This shift directs attention to the agency of the multiple actors involved in inclusive education, offering a framework for understanding how these actors, operating within resource limitations, employ flexible strategies to advance inclusive education work.

2.2. The Roles of Multiple Actors in Inclusive Education

The effective implementation of inclusive education ultimately rests upon the concrete actions of school-based actors, primarily principals, administrators, and teachers. How these individuals address the needs of students with special needs in their daily work and how they collaborate with one another has been a persistent focus of scholarly inquiry. Regarding principals, researchers generally emphasize their critical role as leaders, asserting that principals' philosophies, resource allocation decisions, and capacity for shaping school culture directly influence the outcomes of inclusive education (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Scheer, 2021). Administrators assume the role of coordinators, responsible for policy implementation, resource deployment, and facilitating communication with teachers (Wang & Deng, 2022). Teachers, as the front-line implementers who directly interact with students, are regarded as pivotal, their attitudes, beliefs, and professional competencies are considered key determinants of the quality of inclusive education (Van Steen & Wilson, 2022; Görel et al., 2023). Researchers examine how teachers address the diverse needs of students with special educational requirements through differentiated instruction, individualized support, and emotional scaffolding (Kupers et al., 2023).

At the collaborative level, synergistic cooperation among principals, administrators, and teachers constitutes an effective pathway to successful inclusive education. Only when principals, administrators and teachers work in concert to establish institutionalized

and routinized mechanisms for communication and collaboration can truly effective support for students with special needs be realized (Manyaka & Simui, 2026; Alias et al., 2025; Yousefi et al., 2025; van Helden, 2025).

However, existing research has primarily focused on advocacy or phenomenological description. Scholars have identified that the actions of key actors in inclusive education directly affect outcomes, pointing out the importance of collaboration or even the establishment of collaborative mechanisms (Freeman-Green et al., 2025). Yet, they rarely probe deeper, in real-world educational practice, when the actions of these actors are constrained by resource scarcity, do they simply stop in their tracks? Or do they, each within their respective roles, continue to sustain the basic operation of inclusive education in a manner that is relatively independent yet oriented toward converging goals?

2.3. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The theory of bricolage offers a unique lens for understanding this issue. It emphasizes how actors creatively utilize the resources at hand, however scattered or limited, to solve problems and address challenges under resource-constrained conditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Scholars have recently begun to introduce bricolage theory into the field of education, exploring, for example, how teachers provide individualized support for students with special needs using limited resources, and how educational communities engage in creative practices under institutional constraints (Grasu & Popovici, 2024; Leow, 2025). These studies affirm the potential of bricolage theory to explain proactive breakthroughs in contexts marked by resource limitations.

However, existing research still has certain limitations. First, studies have primarily focused on teachers as the main actors, with limited analytical attention paid to the multiple actors of principals, administrators, and teachers collectively. Second, research has largely concentrated on practices within western educational contexts, leaving comparatively little exploration of how multiple actors in the unique context of Chinese public schools navigate resource constraints to advance inclusive education practices.

Guided by bricolage theory, this study explores how multiple actors in Chinese public schools, namely principals, administrators, and teachers, advance inclusive education through position-specific bricolage practices under resource constraints. Specifically, this study addresses the following three progressively focused research questions:

- i. How do principals, administrators, and teachers advance inclusive education practices under resource-constrained conditions?
- ii. What outcomes are achieved through these practices?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Based on the research questions, this study employs a qualitative research approach aimed at deeply investigating the practices through which principals, administrators, and teachers in Chinese public schools advance inclusive education under resource constraints. Bricolage theory focuses on how actors creatively utilize resources at hand

to address challenges under resource-constrained conditions, which requires a research design capable of reaching the micro-level to capture how various actors creatively engage in practice amidst resource limitations in their daily work. Qualitative research allows researchers to enter the field, listen to the narratives of actors, and thereby understand how they devise solutions and seek pathways forward under conditions of resource scarcity, making it a research approach capable of addressing the questions posed in this study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.2. Location and Participants

This study selected four public schools in Nanning, the capital city of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China, as the research sites, including two public middle schools and two public elementary schools. Guangxi, as a western province of China, has a relatively underdeveloped economy and limited resources for inclusive education. Nanning, being the provincial capital, is representative of the state of inclusive education development in Guangxi. The four schools selected are recognized for their exemplary inclusive education practices and frequently serve as models for visits and learning by other schools. Schools with demonstrated excellence in inclusive education are more likely to yield richer insights into the practices of multiple actors.

According to Chinese policy documents such as People with disabilities act of the Peoples Republic of China (2018), Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2018) and Guidance on Strengthening the Work of Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Compulsory Education (2020), regular schools are required to admit children and adolescents with disabilities who are capable of adapting to regular school life, and to provide them with necessary learning and rehabilitation support. Although senior high schools and universities are also required to enroll students with special needs, in practice, due to factors such as academic pressure, inclusive education efforts are more concentrated at the elementary and junior high school. Therefore, selecting schools within the compulsory education stage as research sites allows for a more focused observation of how schools advance inclusive education under resource constraints.

This study employed a purposive sampling method to select participants, ensuring that those chosen could provide rich information. The participants included principals, administrators, and frontline teachers. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, resulting in a final sample of six participants, including two principals, one administrator, and three frontline teachers (as presented in Table 1). The participants encompassed the core actors involved in inclusive education work within schools, and the diverse identities of the participants provided multiple perspectives and rich practical details. This composition effectively addresses the exploratory question of how multiple actors engage in bricolage practices.

Table 1: Participants

School and Respondent	Age	Gender	Working Experience	Working Experience in current school
A junior high school Principal	37	Female	12	4
B primary school Principal	37	Female	13	4

A primary school Management personnel	38	Male	15	3
B junior high school Management personnel	35	Male	10	4
A primary school Class teacher	29	Male	3	3
B junior high school Class teacher	36	Male	11	6
B primary school Resource Teacher	25	Female	3	3

3.3. Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The interview approach is particularly suitable for exploratory research, as it enables in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and the meanings they attribute to their actions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Semi-structured interviews not only ensure that the interview content remains focused on the research questions but also provide participants with sufficient space to narrate their own practices, thereby authentically capturing the concrete processes through which they devise solutions and seek pathways forward under resource constraints.

Prior to the formal interviews, the research has obtained ethical review approval from the Guangxi Ethics Association in China. The researcher primarily contacted principals or administrators from each school by telephone. The researcher clearly explained the purpose of the study and the content of the interviews, establishing a foundational level of trust with the participants. The participants expressed their support and welcome for the study, noting that it would help them reflect on and organize their inclusive education practices. Principals and administrators also recommended experienced frontline teachers to the researcher. This snowball sampling approach facilitated the researcher's access to teachers who work closely with students with special needs on a daily basis and have accumulated extensive practical experience.

All interviews were conducted between August and December 2025, at locations chosen by the participants, typically on their school premises. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was either audio-recorded or documented through note-taking. The study adhered to the principle of voluntary participation. Participants were informed that the data would be used solely for academic research purposes and that they had the right to pause or withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences.

When analyzing up to the sixth interviewee (Resource Teacher at B Primary School), no new themes or insights emerged, and subsequent interviews only repeated existing information. Therefore, it can be determined that data saturation was reached at this point. To protect participant privacy, identifiable information such as names and school affiliations was anonymized during the transcription process.

3.4. Interview question

- i. What resource constraints or difficulties have you encountered in promoting inclusive education?
- ii. How did you specifically handle these restrictions?

- iii. What achievements have been made in inclusive education work?

3.5. Data Analysis

This study followed the six-phase analytical framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), employing thematic analysis to examine the interview data. The researcher used Nvivo software to code the data line by line. Guided by bricolage theory, the coding process focused on content related to bricolage strategies and action constraints as mentioned by participants. Subsequently, the researcher categorized, integrated and analyzed the initial codes to develop sub-themes and themes. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher maintained reflexivity by regularly recording analytical memos, striving to minimize the influence of personal experiences and identity on the data interpretation.

3.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, data source triangulation was achieved by interviewing three different categories of participants, including principals, administrators, and teachers. Thereby cross-validating information from multiple perspectives and enhancing the comprehensiveness and credibility of the findings. Additionally, two strategies, peer review and member checking, were employed to reduce researcher subjectivity and verify the understanding of participants' experiences. Furthermore, the research findings are presented through thick description, enabling readers to assess the transferability of the study's conclusions.

4. Finding

The study identified three themes and nine sub themes (Table 2).

Table 2: The theme and sub-theme

Theme	Sub-theme
Theme1 Principals' Bricolage Practices	1.Building a Management Framework Amidst Organizational Scarcity 2.Integrating Limited Resources 3.Engage in frontline work
Theme 2 Administrators' Bricolage Practices	1.Flexible Adaptation of Policies 2.Fulfilling a Coordinating Role 3.Daily Monitoring
Theme 3 Teachers' Bricolage Practices	1.Exploring Instructional Strategies with Limited Resources 2.Using Limited Resources to Track Student Progress 3.Using Emotional Support to Create a Warm Environment

4.1. Theme 1: Principals' Bricolage Practices

Faced with policy requirements and resource constraints, principals constructed organizational frameworks within existing conditions, integrated limited resources, and engaged with frontline work to understand the realities of practice.

4.1.1. Building a Management Framework Amidst Organizational Scarcity

Faced with the mandatory policy requirement of admitting all eligible students, principals must first address the challenge of organizational resource scarcity. With no established management team, no clear division of labor mechanisms, and few concrete institutional guidelines to refer to, interviewed principals commonly reported establishing special leading groups. The formation of such leading groups essentially constitutes a form of human resource bricolage, integrating originally dispersed administrative forces to ensure that responsibility for inclusive education work is assigned and that the work is actually carried out.

"Firstly, the school will establish a relevant support system and set up a leadership group specifically responsible for inclusive education, in order to coordinate various related affairs of inclusive education." (A junior high school principal)

"Establish a leadership group for inclusive learning with the principal as the group leader, and clarify the responsibilities of each member." (B primary school principal)

In constructing this organizational framework, principals optimize the allocation of available human resources based on their school's existing staffing. As the primary school administrator noted:

"The school has established a three-tier management mechanism for inclusive education, involving the principal, the overseeing academic director, special education teachers, homeroom teachers and subject teachers. Everyone's responsibilities are clearly defined, and we work together to ensure the success of the inclusive education." (A Primary School Management Personnel)

Notably, these school had only one to three teachers with a professional background in special education, far from sufficient to meet the needs of all students requiring support. This three-tier management mechanism effectively represents a reallocation of human resources. By integrating frontline teachers, including homeroom teachers, subject teachers, and school counselors, into the support network, the school compensates for the shortage of specialized personnel. This exemplifies precisely what bricolage theory describes as the creative combination of resources at hand (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

It is precisely because of principals' proactive organizational practices that relevant personnel in inclusive education can work more efficiently. As the A primary school administrator stated: *"With a sound system in place, we can coordinate and collaborate, working more efficiently."* Under conditions where policy guidelines lack specificity and professional support is insufficient, the establishment of an organizational framework has moved inclusive education work from groping in the dark to structured operation, laying the foundation for effective implementation.

4.1.2. Integrating Limited Resources

Insufficient professional support and funding are common challenges principals face in implementing inclusive education. As the principal of elementary school B remarked:

"Due to a lack of funding, professional training for teachers cannot be guaranteed, making it impossible to build a more professional teaching team." (Principal of B primary school)

However, principals have not stopped and waited for resources to arrive, instead, they engage in resource integration and development under existing constraints. This bricolage manifests in three aspects: the redeployment of personnel, the adaptation of materials, and the cultivation of a supportive atmosphere.

4.1.3. Human Resource Bricolage

Principals have adopted pragmatic approaches. On one hand, they recruit specialized teachers. *"Hiring two teachers with special education backgrounds."* and *"Recruiting full-time school counselors."* (A junior high school principal). On the other hand, they enhance the professional capacity of existing teaching staff by requiring that *"All homeroom teachers complete compulsory psychology training and pass the Psychology C Certificate examination organized by the education department before they can take up their posts."* (B primary school principal). This exemplifies *"Mobilizing all available resources."* (B junior high school Management personnel). Primary School A adopted a similar approach, selecting experienced and dedicated teachers and *"Appointing those with strong capabilities and rich teaching experience as homeroom teachers."* (A primary school administrator). Under conditions of insufficient professional support, experience itself becomes a valuable and reliable resource.

4.1.4. Adaptation of Physical Conditions

"Due to limited funding and constrained school space, our school lacks adequate facilities for special education students, including specialized classrooms, equipment, and rehabilitation equipment." (B junior high school class teacher). To meet the needs of students with special requirements, principals strive to improve physical conditions within existing constraints. As the principal of junior high school A explained, the school *"plans the allocation of school resources to provide additional support for Learning in Regular Classrooms classes. This includes planning and constructing accessible pathways in teaching buildings and providing teaching aids for some classrooms."* Although these modifications are relatively minor, they provide tangible assistance to students with mobility difficulties. One class teacher mentioned that principals, based on the actual needs of students with special needs, *"Carry out accessibility modifications to school facilities, such as installing accessible ramps, handrails, and low-height washbasins."* (B junior high school class teacher). These adaptations are not merely copied from standard blueprints but are implemented *"according to students' specific circumstances"* (B junior high school class teacher). Despite insufficient funding, these practical and targeted physical improvements provide genuine convenience for students with special needs.

4.1.5. Fostering an Inclusive Atmosphere

Principals actively work to cultivate a positive atmosphere that fosters greater understanding and support for inclusive education. Through various occasions, principals repeatedly emphasize the importance of inclusive education. As one teacher from junior high school B noted, *"The principal emphasizes approaches and methods for educating students with special needs during staff conference."* At the elementary school

level, principals demonstrate even greater attention to detail, *"Holding separate meetings with homeroom teachers to stress the precautions they need to take when working with students with special needs."* (B primary school resource teacher).

Beyond verbal reinforcement in meetings, principals also transmit their vision through concrete actions. B junior high school administrator shared a detail: *"The principal leads by example in showing care for children with special needs, organizing mid-level leaders and teachers to visit and support them, infusing strength into their growth."* This kind of role modeling through action proves more persuasive than mere words. As one teacher observed, *"Beliefs shape actions."* (A primary school class teacher). The principal's demonstrated commitment and investment subtly yet powerfully influence teachers' attitudes and behaviors, gradually making inclusion and support an integral part of the school culture.

Under conditions of limited funding and human resources, principals have achieved positive outcomes through resource integration. As the resource teacher from B primary school noted, *"The results have been remarkable. Teachers' inclusive education competencies have improved. They are more understanding and accepting of students, can recognize the unique strengths of different children, and are willing to engage in this work."* The administrator from B junior high school also observed, *"We have created a warmer, higher-quality, and more harmonious educational environment, providing students with more equitable, high quality, and diverse learning opportunities. Children with special needs now enjoy greater equality and care."*

4.2. Engaging with the Frontline

Principals also pay close attention to the implementation of policies on the ground. To gain an accurate understanding of the actual situation, principals choose to engage directly with the frontline, learning about the actual operational status of inclusive education work through various means. This approach allows principals to bridge the distance of management, making inclusive education efforts more targeted and effective.

4.2.1. Principals Actively Engage with Frontline Realities

As the principal of B primary school noted: *"Principals need to develop a deep understanding of their students. I communicate with parents of children with special needs, review their recent assessments and diagnostic reports, and consult with relevant experts to gain as comprehensive an understanding of each child's situation as possible."* This hands-on approach to communication not only strengthens parents' trust in the school's work but also enables principals to develop a more accurate grasp of students' circumstances and actual needs. As one teacher remarked, *"If the principal personally takes the trouble to inquire, we naturally become more committed."* (B primary school resource teacher). This suggests that principals' direct involvement positively shapes teachers' attitudes toward their work.

4.2.2. Establishing Systematic Feedback Mechanisms

As the primary school administrator from School A explained, the school has

"improved mechanisms at the institutional level to strengthen monitoring of policy implementation effectiveness through questionnaires, smooth the

feedback channels between home and school, conversations between teachers and students, enhanced duty leadership inspections, and the establishment of record-keeping systems, thereby promptly correcting any inappropriate practices in inclusive education work."

The academic affairs office regularly compiles feedback from various sources, which is then *"summarized and reported to the principal."* (A primary school administrator). This mechanism ensures that problems can be identified, reported, and addressed in a timely manner, preventing issues from being unresolved for extended periods.

4.3. Theme 2: Administrators' Bricolage Practices

With the institutional framework established by principals, administrators assume the critical responsibility of translating policy requirements into concrete actions. Positioned as the intermediary linking decision-making and implementation levels, they demonstrate distinctive bricolage wisdom under resource constraints. This is manifested in three ways: seeking possibilities for flexibility within limited institutional space, coordinating relationships among various stakeholders in the absence of formal communication mechanisms, and ensuring through daily monitoring that practices remain faithful to policy intentions.

4.3.1. Flexible Adaptation of Policies

The primary dilemma faced by administrators is that while policy requirements are mandatory, the supporting institutional guidelines are often insufficiently specific. When policy documents fail to cover all practical situations, administrators have no choice but to make flexible adaptations during implementation.

This flexibility is most typically manifested in the process of class placement. A primary school class teacher described the administrators' approach: *"Based on student enrollment at the beginning of the semester, administrators arrange for homeroom teachers to draw lots for class assignment. This lottery system ensures the principle of fairness and justice."* While the lottery served as a mechanism to guarantee procedural fairness, the administrator did not stop there.

"For students with special needs in the inclusive education, such as those with physical disabilities who use wheelchairs, we place them in classes located on the first floor to facilitate their access to learning." (A primary school class teacher).

The lottery ensures formal equity, while the floor adjustment responds to practical needs. This approach of lottery plus fine-tuning, implemented without violating institutional regulations, exemplifies the concrete innovative practices undertaken by administrators within the parameters of policy guidance.

Administrators' flexibility is also reflected in the provision of implicit support. As the teacher from junior high school B noted,

"In the absence of specific institutional regulations, homeroom teachers respond to the principal's expectations by adapting their approach based on the particular needs of their students with special needs, providing

additional assistance and guidance in daily learning and life.”(B junior high school Class teacher)

This statement actually reveals a reality at the administrative level. Policy documents rarely cover every conceivable situation, and administrators often tacitly approve, or even encourage, teachers to exercise flexibility based on actual circumstances. This tacit approval itself constitutes a form of strategic accommodation.

Of course, flexibility has its limits. Excessive reliance on flexible adaptations without institutional support can lead to excessive arbitrariness in practice. As one principal reflected,

“How to effectively track and monitor the implementation of inclusive education across classes, and how to guide teachers in carrying out their work scientifically—these aspects remain not detailed enough in terms of technical support and guidance.” (B primary school principal).

Therefore, administrators’ flexible practices ultimately require gradual standardization through ongoing institutional refinement.

4.3.2. Fulfilling a Coordinating Role

Management personnel are at the middle level in the inclusive education organizational structure. They are accountable to principals, connect with frontline teachers, and must coordinate horizontally across various departments. In the absence of formal communication mechanisms and dedicated coordination positions, they undertake substantial coordinating work. With no established procedures to follow, they create procedures themselves. Lacking institutionalized communication channels, they connect all parts in their own ways.

Administrators must translate principals’ decisions into actionable plans. As A primary school administrator described the role:

“As a middle-level school administrator, I play the roles of coordinator and executor. I assist the school in managing students with special needs in inclusive education and participate in developing corresponding work plan.” (A primary school management personnel)

Principals’ decisions provide directional guidance, while administrators must refine them into specific tasks that teachers can implement. This translation process itself constitutes creative work, as there are no ready-made templates to follow. Plans must be designed and work advanced based on the school's actual circumstances.

Administrators must also secure teachers' understanding and support. Teachers are the ultimate implementers, but if they do not understand or accept the plans, even the best-designed initiatives will be difficult to put into practice. As A primary school administrator noted,

“We hold meetings with subject teachers of the relevant classes to share information about students in the inclusive education, seeking their support and understanding.” (A primary school management personnel)

Such meetings are not simply about issuing directives, they are a process of explanation, communication, and consensus-building.

Administrators must also connect various departments to form a cohesive force for inclusive education work. The inclusive education involves multiple departments, including instruction, moral education and logistics. As A primary school class teacher explained, the school

“standardizes the organizational structure and management, ensuring that the instructional department, moral education department, and logistics support department integrate the educational needs of children in the inclusive education into their work plans. Addressing aspects such as specific educational strategies and performance management.” (A primary school class teacher)

Behind this cross-departmental integration lies the communication and coordination efforts of administrators. It is through their patient and persistent liaison work that the work plans of different departments can align with and mutually support one another, enabling coordinated progress.

4.3.3. Daily Monitoring

If resources were abundant, monitoring could be accomplished by dedicated supervisory teams, standardized assessment tools, and automated data systems. However, the schools in this study did not have access to such conditions. As the principal of primary school A noted:

“A hands-off approach to implementation. How to effectively track and monitor the implementation of inclusive education across classes, and how to guide teachers in carrying out their work scientifically, these aspects remain insufficiently specific in strategy and lack adequate technical support.” (Principal of A Primary School)

This raises the question for administrators: how can monitoring be conducted to ensure the effectiveness of inclusive education work under these constraints?

Classroom walkthroughs and observations represent a monitoring approach in which administrators compensate for the lack of standardized tools through on-site observation. As A primary school administrator explained, *“Administrators need to sit in on classes, provide one-on-one support to specific classes, and pay extra attention to classes with children with special needs.”* He personally practices this approach:

“In my supervisory role, I enter classes at irregular intervals to observe the teachers' management practices and methods, whether their instruction follows requirements, and to identify difficulties and questions that arise during implementation, providing answers and guidance.” (A primary school management personnel)

This type of monitoring serves primarily to gain an understanding of how inclusive education is actually being implemented, enabling timely identification and resolution of problems as they emerge.

In the absence of dedicated supervisory teams and automated systems, administrators rely on existing personnel to patch together a monitoring network, constructing feedback channels through manual means. As A primary school administrator explained,

“At the school level, we improve mechanisms by using questionnaires, maintaining open home-school feedback channels, conducting teacher-student conversations, enhancing duty leadership inspections, and establishing record-keeping systems to strengthen oversight of policy implementation effectiveness and promptly correct inappropriate practices in inclusive education work.” (A primary school management personnel)

Serving as information hubs, administrators compile feedback from various sources and report it upward, providing the basis for principals to adjust their decisions. As the same administrator noted,

“The measures above are primarily monitored and followed up by the school's Moral Education Department and subject teaching research leaders, with the Moral Education Department regularly compiling the information and reporting it to the principal.” (A primary school management personnel)

This approach to monitoring, patched together under resource constraints, may not be comprehensive in scope, yet it provides a fundamental safeguard for the implementation of inclusive education in the absence of institutional and technical support.

4.4. Theme 3: Teachers' Bricolage Practices

In the implementation of inclusive education, teachers are the actors who directly engage with students. Unlike principals and administrators, teachers have no authority to allocate human, financial or material resources, no function for cross-departmental coordination, and not even dedicated working time for this purpose. It is precisely under such conditions that teachers have explored various practices.

4.4.1. Exploring Instructional Strategies with Limited Resources

Regular classes were originally designed to meet the needs of the majority of students. When students with special needs enter these classrooms, teachers are confronted with a challenge: how to address the learning needs of these students while the teaching materials and instructional hours remain unchanged.

Teachers adjust expectations based on individual students' circumstances. As the resource teacher from B primary school explained,

“Students with special needs do study academic subjects, and progress certainly occurs, but it takes much more time. With academic subjects, the

goal is for them to recognize some basic characters. There are no particularly rigid requirements.”(B primary school resource teacher)

This represents a pragmatic bricolage strategy. When students cannot keep pace with uniform progress requirements, teachers adjust expectations based on actual circumstances, replacing Must Achieve Certain Scores with Can Recognize Some Characters, thereby finding a workable balance between policy requirements and student realities.

More experienced teachers undertake more nuanced explorations. As a teacher from junior high school B explained,

“In terms of instruction, teachers are expected to prepare lessons according to teaching requirements while developing tiered teaching objectives. The learning objectives for special needs students must be clear and targeted, appropriately scaled back compared to those for regular students.” (B junior high school class teacher)

This approach responds to student differences through layered classification methods, without increasing instructional hours or resources.

Individualized instruction represents a higher level of bricolage. As the resource teacher from B primary school explained,

“As a resource teacher, I develop individualized education plans for each student with special needs through document reviews, subject teacher meetings, and family interviews.” (B primary school resource teacher)

With limited professional support, this teacher mobilized all available resources, consulting documents, seeking advice from colleagues, and interviewing parents, to piece together scattered information and form a personalized growth plan tailored to each student.

The most touching bricolage occurs in the smallest details. A teacher from junior high school B shared an example:

“Take a student in my class with severe visual impairment. He has to press his eyes directly against the textbook to see. Apart from the large-print textbooks provided for him, he can barely see anything. I often deliberately read aloud things that others can simply look at, turning them into something he can hear.”(B junior high school class teacher)

With no specialized assistive devices and no additional teaching assistants, this teacher used nothing but her own voice, transforming what is meant to be seen into something that can be heard, bridging the student's disability in the most straightforward way. This exemplifies precisely what bricolage theory describes as using the resources at hand to solve problems (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

4.4.2. Using Limited Resources to Track Student Progress

Continuous observation and documentation are crucial for the growth of students with special needs. In the absence of professional assessment tools and information systems, teachers utilize the limited resources at their disposal to track student progress.

One Student, One File serves as an effective approach. As a class teacher explained:

"We establish one student, one file to track and document the progress of students with special needs in school. As a homeroom teacher, I once met a child with autism. He struggled with social interaction, spoke unclearly, had some bad habits, was prone to picking up negative behaviors from others, and lacked emotional regulation skills. Consequently, he frequently conflicted with classmates from the very beginning. So I utilized the one student, one file approach to document his situation at school, analyze his behavior, provide timely affirmation for his positive actions, and strengthen his confidence in learning and living at school." (A primary school class teacher)

Through observing, documenting, analyzing behaviors, and providing timely feedback, the teacher piece together the growth trajectory of the child with autism, bit by bit.

More detailed tracking requires additional time and patience. As A primary school class teacher explained,

"We strive to understand students comprehensively and from multiple dimensions through various means: face-to-face conversations with students, phone calls with parents, home visits, and interviews with other students. We pay particular attention to students with special needs, promptly recording instances of truancy, early departures, low moods, emotional outbursts, and similar situations." (A primary school class teacher)

Without professional assessment tools, teachers rely on conversations, phone calls, and home visits to develop a more holistic understanding of students' conditions.

A primary school administrator described this approach from an institutional perspective:

"Each semester, every student has a growth record book. Teachers conduct regular one-on-one conversations with students each month. The responsible teachers must not only focus on classroom instruction but also constantly attend to the psychological state and adaptive progress of students with special needs." (B junior high school management personnel)

Given that homeroom teachers are responsible for dozens of students simultaneously, maintaining these regular conversations demonstrates how teachers, despite limited time and energy, continue to systematically document student situations as a way to understand the circumstances of those with special needs.

4.4.3. Using Emotional Support to Create a Warm Environment

Teachers draw upon their emotional investment, patience, and time to create an environment where students feel safe and accepted.

Going beyond routine duties with additional care. A primary school class teacher explained,

"During classroom instruction, we provide more encouragement and inspiration to students with special needs. Through more contact, more communication, more care, and more activities, we help students with special needs feel the school's warmth." (A primary school class teacher)

This represents the additional care teachers extend to students with special needs, using their own time and emotional investment beyond teaching work. As another primary school class teacher from School A noted,

"Offering more praise and encouragement to children with special needs helps facilitate their progress while simultaneously stimulating their interest in learning." (A primary school class teacher)

Under conditions of resource scarcity, praise and encouragement may be the resources teachers can consistently provide to motivate students and propel them forward.

Peer support is another strategy teachers have developed under resource constraints. As a teacher from junior high school B explained,

"We arrange for responsible and caring classmates to provide one-on-one assistance to students in the Learning in inclusive education, helping them adapt more quickly to the class environment and school life." (B junior high school class teacher)

Given teachers' limited time and energy, organizing students into a support network represents an ingenious form of resource bricolage, leveraging student resources to compensate for the shortage of teacher resources.

The principal of B primary school shared a touching case:

"For example, there is a child named X in Class X, Grade X, who has some difficulties in verbal communication and processes information relatively slowly. However, he is a earnest child. With the teachers' encouragement and the patient companionship and support of his classmates, he has begun to participate more actively in class discussions, and his expressive ability has improved significantly." (B primary school principal)

The transformation of this child was not achieved through equipment or funding, but through teachers' encouragement and classmates' companionship. These resources cost no money but are pieced together with dedication. This is precisely the kind of bricolage that emerges from genuine care and attention.

Teachers' efforts to explore within limited conditions stem not only from policy mandates but also, perhaps more fundamentally, from their sense of responsibility and commitment. As one teacher from junior high school B reflected,

"Teachers hope that every student can grow and that no student's situation deteriorates during the years we are responsible for them. I suppose this is every teacher's sense of calling." (B junior high school class teacher)

This sense of calling, under conditions of resource scarcity, becomes a vital source of motivation that sustains teachers in their ongoing efforts.

Through the bricolage practices of principals, administrators, and teachers under resource constraints, an inclusive school culture has gradually taken shape, teachers' professional competencies have been enhanced, and students with special needs have achieved better growth. As a teacher from junior high school B noted,

"Inclusive education promotes diversity and inclusivity in school culture. Through interactions with students with special needs, regular students can develop empathy and social responsibility, forming equitable and friendly peer relationships." (B junior high school Class teacher)

A primary school class teacher observed,

"Spending five days a week together with students, we've seen increased initiative. for example, during the school sports meet, students actively signed up to participate." Additionally, "Teachers' understanding and capabilities regarding special education have improved, enabling them to better comprehend and support the learning needs of these students." (Principal A of Junior High School).

These subtle yet genuine changes exemplify the value of bricolage practices.

The achievement of these outcomes has not relied on abundant resources or perfect system, but rather on principals, administrators, and teachers, each in their own roles, piecing things together bit by bit using the tools at hand, limited time, and genuine dedication.

5. Discussion

This study finds that under conditions of resource scarcity and institutional inadequacy, the multiple actors in schools did not passively wait but agentively engaged in creative practices using the resources at hand. Principals constructed organizational frameworks, administrators sought methods for implementation, and teachers adopted flexible approaches in practice. Although these practices varied in emphasis according to different roles, they collectively converged toward the common goal of advancing inclusive education.

This finding aligns closely with the core propositions of bricolage theory. Lévi-Strauss (1966) proposed that the bricoleur differs from the engineer in that the former does not rely on specially designed tools and materials but flexibly utilizes resources at hand to

address new challenges. The principals, administrators, and teachers in this study exemplify such bricoleurs. Lacking dedicated special education teams, sufficient funding and ready-made work templates, they nonetheless explored effective pathways for inclusive education to function, using existing personnel, limited time, and practical wisdom. As Kincheloe and Berry (2004) observed, bricolage is a practice of creating within constraints. It neither denies structural limitations nor overlooks the agency of actors. The findings of this study provide vivid empirical evidence for this proposition.

This finding takes on added significance when situated within the broader context of China's educational reform. Since the establishment of the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) policy through the Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities (1994), China's policy framework for inclusive education has been progressively refined, and the enrollment rate of school-aged children with disabilities in compulsory education has increased substantially (Wang & Yang, 2024). However, a persistent tension remains between policy advancement and resource provision. As Deng (2004) observed, the implementation of the LRC policy has been marked by numerous contradictions and conflicts. This study not only reveals these contradictions and conflicts but also illuminates the micro-level processes through which actors devise solutions and seek pathways forward amidst such tensions. This shift in research perspective, from focusing on what is lacking to examining what people do, contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying inclusive education implementation.

As can be seen from the study, while the bricolage practices of multiple actors across the four schools exhibited common patterns, subtle yet meaningful differences emerged between elementary and middle schools. In terms of management, elementary school principals placed greater emphasis on cultivating a nurturing and emotionally supportive atmosphere for students, such as convening separate meetings with homeroom teachers to discuss individualized needs and leading by example in demonstrating care for students. In contrast, middle school principals' bricolage practices tended toward adjusting management and instructional strategies to respond to academic demands.

This distinction was even more pronounced at the teacher level. Elementary school teachers focused more on emotional scaffolding and peer companionship, utilizing praise, encouragement, and classroom friendship as primary resources for inclusive education. Middle school teachers, operating in a more academically pressurized environment, engaged more frequently in instructionally oriented bricolage, such as developing tiered teaching objectives and adapting content to accommodate diverse learners. Even the use of peer support carried different connotations: in elementary schools, it emphasized fostering a sense of belonging; in middle schools, it was often articulated as helping students adapt more quickly to the class environment and school life. These nuanced differences suggest that bricolage practices manifest differently according to school level, student needs, and contextual pressures. This also highlights a core insight of bricolage theory: creative resource use is inherently situated, always responding to the specific constraints of a given context (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

This study also finds that the emergence of bricolage practices results from the interplay of multiple factors. The first factor is the binding force of policy. The policy pressure of admitting all eligible students constitutes the institutional precondition for bricolage practices. As Deng (2004) noted in his study of LRC policy implementation in China, the

tension between policy requirements and school realities serves as a significant driving force prompting schools to seek adaptive strategies. The second factor is value-driven motivations of the actors themselves. Principals' level of commitment and teachers' professional ethos directly influence whether they are willing to engage in bricolage and to what extent they pursue it. It is proactive values that lead principals to actively integrate resources and engage deeply with frontline supervision. It is teachers' sense of responsibility and calling that sustain their efforts in tracking students through one student, one file approaches and providing emotional support with their personal time. This finding resonates with the meta-analysis by Van Steen and Wilson (2022), which demonstrated that teachers' beliefs significantly influence their inclusive education practices.

The third factor is the realistic constraints of resource conditions. Insufficient funding, shortages of specialized personnel, and the lack of institutional guidelines serve both as the context for bricolage and as the obstacles that bricolage practices must overcome. Participants in this study repeatedly mentioned difficulties such as lack of funding, inability to guarantee professional training, and absence of specific institutional regulations. These challenges are not unique to China. In their systematic review of inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries, Mendoza and Heymann (2024) found that resource constraints are a common challenge faced by countries worldwide. This study not only presents these constraints but also reveals how actors do as much as possible with limited resources under such constrained conditions.

Bricolage practices have yielded observable outcomes, including teacher growth, student development and the formation of an inclusive atmosphere. This demonstrates that even under conditions of resource scarcity, actor agency can generate positive change. However, bricolage also has inherent limitations. For instance, it struggles to achieve high-quality individualized instruction and cannot resolve systemic institutional deficiencies. From the perspective of bricolage theory, bricolage is essentially a makeshift or expedient measure (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). It can sustain system functioning when resources are scarce, but it cannot substitute for systematic institutional construction and resource investment. As Fullan (2015) noted in his research on educational change, while individual agency is important, the depth and sustainability of change will be limited without systemic support. The findings of this study provide empirical support for this assertion. Although bricolage practices can address many challenges in inclusive education and generate positive outcomes under constrained conditions, sustaining and maximizing the advancement of inclusive education ultimately requires more well developed policies, institutions, working mechanisms, and technical support.

6. Limitations

This study selected only four schools in Nanning, with a limited sample size. Therefore, readers should assess the transferability of the findings in light of their specific contexts. Future research could examine the findings of this study across more regions and diverse school types to explore both commonalities and variations in bricolage practices. Additionally, this study focused on three categories of school-based actors, principals, administrators, and teachers, but did not deeply explore the roles of external forces such as parents, communities, and professional institutions. Future research could further investigate how these external forces interact with school-based actors and how they participate in bricolage.

7. Conclusion

Adopting the perspective of bricolage theory, this study shifts the analytical focus from what is lacking to what people do under conditions of scarcity, deepening the understanding of implementation mechanisms in inclusive education. It also offers practical implications for policymakers and school administrators. Alongside increasing resource investment, attention should be paid to creating more favorable institutional conditions for schools' bricolage practices, enabling dispersed local, grassroots practices to be seen, learned from, and ultimately institutionalized.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All procedures involving human participants in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards approved by the Guangxi Ethics Association of China. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Acknowledgement

This article draws on empirical data collected during the author's doctoral research at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study, including financial, personal, or institutional relationships that may affect the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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