



A Comparative Analysis of Special Education Major in Chinese and American Universities

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Abstract. Special education has become an important research topic with more attention paid to the people with disabilities in Chinese society. Improving the level of special education can increase the employment options of Chinese disabled people and lift more disabled people out of poverty. By attracting more students to choose special education and improving the teaching model, universities can cultivate more excellent talents for society. Compared with special education majors in China, American schools have a richer experience. Therefore, this research aims to find a method suitable for the advancement of special education in Chinese universities by comparing the special education major of American and Chinese universities. The findings of this study show that the curriculum of special education majors in Chinese universities and the career identity of students are deficient, so universities should improve both of these areas by changing the structure of the curriculum, increasing opportunities for events and so on.

Keywords: Special Education · Disability · Special Education Major · China, · America

1 Introduction

Although China and the United States have different economic conditions and educational environments, both countries have great demand for talents in special education. Therefore, students majoring in special education in China and the United States have a high employment rate. Universities can meet the needs of the country faster by improving the teaching methods, curriculum, and employment assistance for special education majors. The United States is one of the countries with the most advanced level of special education globally, and special education plays a crucial role in the American education system [1]. However, China did not establish special education major at universities until 1986, so special education major in China has a shorter history of development and more shortcoming than that in the United States. After World War II, the United States began to focus on cultivating teachers engaged in special education and has already set up relevant courses in colleges and universities [1]. In only more than 30 years, the special education major in Chinese universities has developed significantly. Also, many experts and scholars have put forward some development suggestions and indicated the problems that China's specialty of special education needs to overcome. This research

will first indicate the areas where the special education majors of Chinese universities need to be improved and then summarize how the special education majors of Chinese universities can be improved through comparative research. The results of this study will enable Chinese universities to learn from the experiences of American universities in special education majors development and help Chinese universities to change their educational models in a focused way. It should be noted that the Chinese and American universities compared in this study are undergraduate.

2 Education Model and Curriculum

2.1 Shortcomings of Special Education Majors in Chinese Universities

Many scholars and experts have put forward the shortcomings of the special education curriculum in Chinese universities: The course lacks pertinence, so students' professional ability needs to be improved [2]; The level of specialization in special education is deficient [3]; The lack of course content leads to too single training objectives [4]. Many such contents prove that the curriculum of special education in China needs to be improved.

2.2 Differences Between the Curriculum of Special Education Majors in China and the United States

From the perspective of the education model, the special education major in American universities is almost integrated with other education majors, while the special education major in China is not integrated with other education majors.

The curriculum arrangement and classification in the United States are very detailed, and there are dozens of majors related to special education alone [1]. In the undergraduate stage, the curriculum of special education majors in the United States is generally composed of general education, professional courses (college requirement), and professional education courses. General education and professional courses are also involved in other majors. General education also includes many categories, such as literature, sociology, physics, chemistry, and mathematics. The professional courses of special education majors in American universities are also divided into several different parts according to different categories, and these parts are usually taught step by step according to students' abilities. Also, there are many courses for transition between different parts. The special education major should be essential in theory and practice. In the curriculum arrangement of special education majors in American universities, the learning contents of each part are not separated but complementary. Through step-by-step learning, students can better connect the knowledge learned in different parts and better apply the knowledge in practice.

The special education major in Chinese undergraduate universities has always advocated the cultivation of compound talents, and the general classification of its curriculum is not much different from that in the United States. However, general education courses of literature and sociology, which are very important for education students, account for only a tiny proportion of general education [3]. Some studies have even found that

many special education colleges in China do not set up courses in Humanities, Social Sciences, or art appreciation [3]. Therefore, the classification and proportion of general education for special education majors in China are more unbalanced than those in the United States.

Moreover, due to the unreasonable curriculum proportion and other reasons, the learning content of China's special education specialty is highly fragmented. Some schools adopt the 2 + 2 model in general education in the first two years plus professional education in the second two years. This model completely separates theoretical knowledge, professional knowledge, and practical experience because general education and professional education can not be carried out simultaneously.

2.3 Changes in the Structure of the Curriculum

After indicating the defects of the curriculum of Chinese special education major, this study obtains two changes in the curriculum arrangement and education model of Chinese Special Education majors through the comparison with the curriculum and education model of the United States: adjusting the proportion of different courses and changing the curriculum model.

For universities that do not arrange humanities, social sciences courses, or art courses in the general education of special education majors, these new classifications should be added to the compulsory general courses. Students are required to choose some courses from each type of general course. For schools that have arranged courses in social sciences and arts, the number of such courses should be appropriately increased. Even for students who choose to teach math subjects, humanities and art appreciation are critical subjects. Having humanistic quality is not limited to liberal arts majors. Students majoring in special education who study science subjects should also have humanistic qualities.

In addition, schools should not allow the knowledge that students learn to be too fragmented. Because general education, professional knowledge, and practice can be done in the same semester, schools do not need to dedicate a whole semester or a whole academic year to general education. In addition, students can be given more freedom to choose courses. When students want to take a professional education course, they can choose a related general education course at the same time. With a progressive education model and the freedom to choose courses, students can learn more knowledge and how to apply it in practice. In addition, additional courses could be added to transition between different knowledge structures. Courses for transitions can be used to better connect knowledge and form a complete knowledge framework.

3 Special Education Students' Professional Identity

3.1 The Importance of the Career Identity

Research on special education students' attitudes and professional identity is quite different in China and the United States. However, scholars in China and the U.S. have begun to pay more attention to the professional identity of college students. There have

been few studies that focus specifically on the professional identity of U.S. special education majors. However, in recent years, as calls for changes in special education majors have increased, more and more Chinese scholars have addressed issues related to the professional identity of Chinese special education students. Professional identity has a positive impact on student's academic success, learning motivation, and professional development [5]. However, it has been presented that Chinese special education majors lack professional identity. Many students do not choose to become special education teachers after graduation because of the lack of professional identity, which has caused a serious brain drain [5]. Therefore, it becomes vital to enhance the career identity of special education majors.

3.2 The Difference in the Way Chinese and American Universities Help Students Gain Career Identity.

Research has shown that many students gain a more precise professional identity after engaging in practice related to their major [6]. However, many studies examining the change of special education majors in Chinese universities have mentioned the lack of practice during students' studies. On the one hand, special education majors are different from other education majors in that they need to learn how to communicate and work with children with disabilities, and they need to have a deep understanding of people with disabilities. However, people with disabilities in China are still a marginalized group. If students are only stuck learning theoretical knowledge, they will not only fail to gain experience with children with disabilities, but they will also lack a basic understanding of people with disabilities. Some surveys even show that students have never heard of a group of teachers in society who specialize in teaching children with intellectual disabilities before choosing their major [7]. The lack of knowledge about children with disabilities makes it even more impossible to develop a sense of responsibility as a special education teacher and gain a professional identity.

On the other hand, because many students generally lack knowledge and understanding of children with disabilities and special education when they first enroll, career planning services in colleges of education can be beneficial in this situation. However, few special education programs in China have a complete career planning service. For first- and second-year student special education majors, career planning can help them form a better perception of their major earlier [5]. For graduating students, career planning can help them understand their ideas and the employment environment and can help them make choices.

Practical courses make up a huge part of the curriculum at American universities. In addition, there are different types of practical courses. For example, New York University's Special Childhood Education program has practicum courses in Bilingual Practicum, Foreign Language Practicum, Science Practicum, and Social Studies Practicum [1]. There are also many other educational practicum courses in American universities, and these practicum courses also take up many credits.

In addition to practicum courses, education programs or colleges at U.S. universities offer many internships and learning resources to help students adjust to life as teachers. Through direct contact with children with disabilities, students will experience positive internal changes and be more likely to gain professional recognition. In addition, U.S.

universities often include guest speaker sessions in their courses. The guest speakers invited by the university usually have many years of practical experience and personal ideas in the special education field, so they can make students think more deeply about special education and what it means to be a teacher.

In addition, every college in the U.S. has a complete service of career planning and course selection guidance. Students can learn about their interests with the help of advisors during the course selection process. Career planning services can also help students recognize their strengths and weaknesses and become more informed.

3.3 Ways to Increase the Career Identity of Special Education Students in Chinese Universities

By comparing special education majors with those in the United States, the study reinforces the importance of increasing practice opportunities and career planning to develop students' professional identity.

First, Chinese universities should increase the number of hands-on opportunities for special education majors. Practicum opportunities include expert lectures, internships, and campus activities. Only through continuous practice can students truly realize the significance of special education and the responsibilities of teachers. With a better understanding of special education, students will better understand how children with disabilities are being educated today and will have a professional identity.

Second, colleges of education should provide career planning services for students. A good career planning service can help students plan and listen to their worries and solve problems. Although they still had negative attitudes toward special education majors when they first started their major, some students gradually realized the importance of what they were studying and stopped feeling negative after communicating with their teachers [6]. Therefore, professional career planning can also help students gain a career identity because it helps them understand their major better and makes them know themselves.

4 Conclusion

Although the economic situation, level of development, and educational models of Chinese and American universities are significantly different, Chinese universities can still learn from American universities' approach to training special education students. They can also refer to the curriculum models of American universities when they encounter some challenges in making changes. This study focuses on improving the special education program in Chinese universities by improving the curriculum and developing students' professional identity. However, this study still has limitations because many factors affect the improvement of special education majors in Chinese universities.

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