

Cultivating Inclusive Classrooms: Strategies for Educational Equity for Non-Chinese-Speaking Students in Hong Kong's Kindergartens

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Abstract

This article explores how Hong Kong kindergartens promote inclusive early childhood education for non-Chinese-speaking children within the dynamic context of China's Greater Bay Area (GBA). It builds upon the findings of a foundational survey of 161 kindergartens from the same research project, which revealed that while new government subsidies encouraged greater inclusion, significant challenges persisted. Specifically, our survey identified systemic barriers, including human resource shortages, a heavy reliance on kindergartens' own efforts to overcome difficulties, and insufficient parental engagement, resulting in disparities in implementation. Building on these findings, this article moves from identifying problems to highlighting solutions. It analyzes qualitative data from 16 case reports, submitted for an award scheme on multicultural inclusion, and 10 follow-up interviews to uncover exemplary practices. Using the CARE model (capability, aspirations, resources, engagement) as an analytical framework, this study identifies key strategies that proactive kindergartens employ, such as building multicultural learning environments, forging strong home-school partnerships, and developing targeted outreach programs. The findings reveal that successful inclusion is not accidental but the result of a deliberate, holistic, and interconnected effort. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how inclusive education policies can be effectively implemented in diverse urban contexts, offering valuable lessons for advancing educational equity and sustainable development (SDGs 4 and 10) in Hong Kong and, with local adaptation, in comparable urban contexts within the GBA and beyond.

Keywords

early childhood education; educational equity; Greater Bay Area; inclusive education; multiculturalism; non-Chinese-speaking children

1. Introduction

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development upholds a global commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including linguistic minorities (United Nations, 2015). In the complex and high-stakes context of Hong Kong, a key city in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), fulfilling this goal for non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) students presents a significant challenge (UNESCO, 2017; Xie et al., 2023). Recent government policy, culminating in the Kindergarten Education Scheme (KES), has aimed to improve inclusion, yet major systemic barriers persist.

A foundational survey for this research project, involving 161 kindergartens, revealed a critical disjuncture. While new government funding successfully increased the willingness of mainstream kindergartens to admit NCS students, it was insufficient to ensure a high-quality, equitable experience. The survey identified the key remaining problems: acute human resource deficits, inadequate frameworks for home-school communication, and a sense of institutional isolation (Wong et al., 2022).

This quantitative work successfully mapped the problems, creating a clear and urgent need to understand how they can be solved. The present qualitative study addresses that exact gap. Moving beyond problem identification to an analysis of solutions, it examines the exemplary practices of proactive kindergartens that have successfully navigated these systemic challenges. It also seeks to identify the deliberate, holistic, and replicable strategies that foster genuine inclusion. To situate the study within the broader fields of educational equity and inclusive education, equity is understood not only as access but as the fair distribution of opportunities, supports, and outcomes (Keddie, 2012), while inclusion is treated as a systemic, whole-school endeavor that maximizes presence, participation, and achievement for all learners (Ainscow, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Slee, 2011). In early childhood education (ECE), inclusive pedagogy argues for high expectations for all, accompanied by responsive support—instead of separating “additional needs” (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Wong et al., 2025)—and universal design-for-learning (UDL), which provides design principles to reduce barriers at the outset (Meyer et al., 2014). Research on family-school partnerships emphasizes relational trust and culturally responsive engagement as drivers of equity (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022). Positioned within this scholarship, the present article contributes practice-based evidence for operationalizing equity and inclusion in a multilingual, high-stakes context where the language of schooling acts as an institutional gatekeeper.

2. The Educational Context for NCS Kindergarteners in Hong Kong

Even though this analysis focuses on Hong Kong, its challenges are familiar to other rapidly diversifying urban centers in the GBA, although they have very different contexts. For example, cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen are also experiencing inward migration, but their non-local populations are primarily internal migrants from other parts of mainland China, creating different linguistic and cultural integration dynamics (Haugen, 2019). Meanwhile, Macau's education system operates with a distinct Portuguese-Cantonese bilingual heritage. Despite these differences under the “one country, two systems” framework, common underlying tensions, such as home-school language gaps, the need for specialized teacher training, and the pressure to integrate diverse student bodies, are emerging across the region (Xie et al., 2023). This section, therefore, frames Hong Kong as the focal case while noting convergences and divergences to inform cautious policy learning rather than claims of direct transfer.

2.1. The Evolving Policy Landscape for NCS Students

The policy landscape for ECE in Hong Kong has undergone a significant evolution, moving from decades of a laissez-faire approach to a more interventionist stance. For most of its history, the ECE sector was a market-driven system where parental demand for academic rigor often overshadowed holistic development (Wong, 2022). The government's first major attempt to steer the sector, the Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS), introduced in 2007, was ultimately criticized for its insufficient funding and failure to address systemic quality issues (Wong & Rao, 2022).

This well-intentioned but flawed first step directly led to the landmark implementation of the KES in the 2017–2018 school year. The new scheme was designed to be a more comprehensive solution, with its direction explicitly guided by the mission stated at the forefront of the *Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education*:

To provide for a sustainable policy that respects the uniqueness of [kindergarten] education in Hong Kong as well as the diverse needs of children, and to provide for equitable access to quality holistic [kindergarten] education that promotes lifelong development of a person. (Committee on Free Kindergarten Education, 2015, p. ii)

While a central component of this mission was the principle of “catering for student diversity,” the initial implementation of the KES created significant practical barriers for kindergartens seeking to support NCS students. The first was a pedagogical challenge: to receive subsidies, kindergartens were required to adopt the local “mother tongue” (i.e., Chinese) as the primary medium of instruction, a policy that placed immediate pressure on institutions needing to develop Chinese language support from a low base (Tse et al., 2020). This was compounded by a financial barrier. The government introduced a funding mechanism that provided substantial subsidies only to kindergartens admitting eight or more NCS students. This “all-or-nothing” threshold drew immediate criticism from advocacy groups like the Equal Opportunities Commission, Hong Kong Unison, and Oxfam Hong Kong, who argued it failed to support kindergartens with smaller numbers of NCS children and was a disincentive to wider inclusion (Wong et al., 2022).

The government revised the policy in the 2019–2020 school year in response to persistent advocacy regarding the funding model. It replaced the problematic threshold with a more granular five-tiered subsidy system. This new model provides a graduated scale of funding, with schools receiving different levels of financial support based on which tier their number of NCS students falls into (e.g., Tier 1 for 1–5 students, Tier 2 for 6–10 students, and so on; see Education Bureau, 2024). The critical change was that kindergartens with even a single NCS student could now receive some support, thereby removing the disincentive for mainstream schools to begin their inclusion journey. It is this revised policy context that frames the present study.

2.2. Converging Pressures: Language, Segregation, and the Critical Kindergarten Stage

The policy landscape operates within a high-stakes linguistic environment. Hong Kong's official language policy promotes “bilingualism and trilingualism,” aiming for proficiency in written Chinese and English, and spoken Cantonese, Putonghua, and English (Evans, 2013; Wong, 2023). While English is an official language and holds prestige in the business and tertiary education sectors, the sociolinguistic reality of the local

community is overwhelmingly Cantonese-speaking. Cantonese is the usual language for over 90% of the population (Census and Statistics Department, 2024), and this is reflected in the local school system, where the vast majority of primary and secondary schools use Chinese as the medium of instruction. Consequently, proficiency in Chinese functions as a powerful gatekeeper to educational and career advancement (Hong Kong Unison, 2016, 2020; Ke & Tucker, 2015; Tse et al., 2020).

This reality is compounded by a legacy of “de facto segregation,” which was intensified by the government’s former “designated schools” policy (Gao, 2023; Hong Kong Unison, 2015; Siriboe & Harfitt, 2017). Although this policy, which channeled NCS students into a limited number of schools, was officially abolished in 2013 to promote integration, research shows its effects linger. A high concentration of NCS students persists in certain kindergartens, many of which continue to adopt English as the medium of instruction (Tse et al., 2020). This systemic inertia directly impedes language learning by depriving students of an immersive Chinese environment. It hinders their social integration and development of a dual identity as both members of an ethnic minority and fully integrated Hong Kong citizens (Cunanan, 2011; Gu & Tong, 2021). The KES policy, particularly its revised funding model, directly attempts to counteract this legacy by incentivizing mainstream kindergartens to become the new frontline for inclusion.

The kindergarten years (ages three to six) represent the crucible where these systemic challenges converge. This period is the most critical juncture for NCS students, where developmental, systemic, and practical pressures intersect. Developmentally, it is the most important window for language acquisition. The scale of this challenge is immense: research shows that native Cantonese-speaking children have mastered a full range of complex interrogative forms by age three (H. Li et al., 2013). This means an initial gap in Chinese proficiency for an NCS child tends to widen over time, creating a cumulative deficit that becomes increasingly difficult to overcome (B. Li et al., 2020). Systemically, it is the first official entry point into Hong Kong’s high-stakes educational pipeline. Practically, kindergartens must now navigate these demands while facing the operational barriers of staff shortages and resource gaps identified in our foundational survey (Wong et al., 2022). Therefore, the central challenge is understanding how proactive kindergartens successfully manage this confluence of pressures to provide the foundational support essential for educational equity.

3. The Present Study

3.1. *From Problem Identification to a Strength-Based Inquiry*

The literature reveals a clear policy shift towards greater inclusion and points to significant systemic and linguistic barriers. A foundational survey was conducted for this research project to investigate the impact of the revised KES funding policy, collecting data from 161 kindergartens across Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2022). The results painted a complex picture. On the one hand, the policy was successful in its primary aim: the financial incentives significantly increased the willingness of mainstream kindergartens to admit NCS students, a crucial first step toward integration. On the other hand, the survey also uncovered significant and persistent systemic barriers that funding alone could not solve. The report identified three critical areas of challenge:

- Human resource deficits: Kindergartens reported acute difficulties recruiting and retaining staff with the necessary language skills and cultural competence to support NCS children and their families.

Many frontline teachers felt ill-equipped, lacking specific training in second-language pedagogy for young learners.

- Insufficient home-school communication: Establishing effective partnerships with NCS parents was a major hurdle. Barriers included language differences, a lack of translated school materials, and a perceived cultural gap in understanding parental engagement expectations.
- Institutional isolation: A pervasive theme was that kindergartens felt they were “on their own.” They reported a lack of centralized support, practical guidance, and shared resources from government bodies, forcing each kindergarten to “reinvent the wheel” in developing its own strategies and materials.

The quantitative data demonstrated that while the government’s policy succeeded in opening the door to access, it did not provide the systemic support needed for a high-quality experience once students were inside. The survey mapped the problems; this qualitative study was designed to discover how they are solved by examining the practices of proactive and successful kindergartens.

3.2. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Rejecting a traditional deficit-oriented perspective that concentrates on the shortcomings of students and institutions (Valencia, 2010), this study instead adopts a strength-based approach. The intellectual roots of this perspective can be traced to pioneers like Bertha Capen Reynolds, who challenged the prevailing pathology-focused models of her time (Reynolds, 1951). This philosophy was later formally articulated as a specific practice model (Weick et al., 1989) and synthesized for broader application (Saleebey, 2012). The approach’s central tenet is that an organization should identify and build upon the existing assets of the people it serves. This principle is directly relevant to the school context. It prompts an institution to view students’ and their families’ cultural and linguistic assets, often termed “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992), not as barriers to overcome but as valuable resources. This perspective uniquely suits this study’s goal of moving beyond problem identification to uncover replicable, successful practices.

This strength-based philosophy is operationalized through the CARE model, an analytical framework developed specifically for this research project (Wong et al., 2022). The model was developed as a synthesis, informed by theories like appreciative inquiry (Hammond, 2013), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the findings from our prior quantitative research, and local policy analysis. The unique linguistic and policy context of Hong Kong necessitated a framework that could capture the dynamic interplay between internal institutional drivers and external supports. While established frameworks like Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provide a broad map of environmental influences, the CARE model offers a more focused lens on institutional agency. Unlike frameworks such as Booth and Ainscow’s (2011) Index for Inclusion, which is comprehensive in scope, the CARE model specifically emphasizes institutional aspirations to investigate the role of institutional mission and values in driving inclusive practices. The model deconstructs institutional efforts into four interrelated domains. Capability refers to the kindergarten’s internal assets and existing abilities, such as staff expertise and established school-based curricula. Aspirations concern the institutional values, vision, and active commitment to supporting NCS students. Resources examine the strategic use of external support, from government subsidies to community and parental partnerships. Finally, engagement focuses on the strategies and actions the kindergarten undertakes, representing the tangible manifestation of the other three components in areas like pedagogy and home-school communication.

Our foundational quantitative study confirmed a strong perception of interconnectivity among these four domains (Wong et al., 2022). However, while that study established that a relationship existed, it could not explain the operational dynamics of *how* these components influence one another in practice. Therefore, understanding the precise nature of these relationships within a real-world context forms a central goal of the present inquiry. This framework guides the inquiry through the following research questions:

1. How do these kindergartens intentionally build their internal *capacity*, including staff expertise and school-based curricula, to effectively support a diverse student body?
2. What are the *aspirations*, core values, philosophies, and motivations that drive successful kindergartens to champion the inclusion of NCS students?
3. How do they strategically mobilize and creatively deploy *resources*, including government funding, community partnerships, and parental capital, to achieve their inclusive goals?
4. What specific, tangible strategies in pedagogy, curriculum design, and home-school communication do these kindergartens implement to put their inclusive vision into practice? How do they *engage*?

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the successful strategies used by Hong Kong kindergartens to support NCS students. The selection of cases was guided by a “positive deviance” or exemplar logic, intentionally focusing on high-performing outliers from an award scheme to identify feasible solution pathways that emerge under common constraints (Bradley et al., 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The primary objective of this research design is not statistical generalizability but analytic transferability. This is achieved by capturing the rich, contextualized, and multifaceted nature of real-world educational practices, thereby providing a deep understanding that can inform practice in other settings (Yin, 2017).

4.1. Data Collection

Data for this study were drawn from two primary sources: comprehensive written reports from the award scheme and follow-up interviews with school leaders.

The first consists of 16 comprehensive case reports, all written in Chinese, submitted by the participating kindergartens. These reports are rich in detail and contain narrative descriptions of institutional philosophies and strategies, supported by evidence such as lesson plans, activity photographs, and samples of parent communication materials. Altogether, this documentary corpus constitutes 59,459 Chinese characters and 366 image files.

The second source comprises 10 follow-up interviews conducted in Cantonese with principals and lead teachers. These interviews were designed to probe deeper into the motivations, challenges, and practical details of the strategies described in the reports. These interviews were conducted in two distinct formats: First, the four finalist kindergartens were invited to 30-minute judging interviews with the principal and, in some cases, a lead teacher, allowing for a more detailed exploration of their work. Second, supplementary phone interviews were conducted with key personnel from six other participating kindergartens to gather additional clarifying information.

4.2. Data Analysis

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, a rigorous, multi-stage thematic analysis process was implemented, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Before the main analysis, the interviews conducted in Cantonese were transcribed semi-verbatim. All subsequent analysis was performed on the original Chinese texts from the reports and the transcribed interviews to preserve the nuances of the original language.

A novel dual-coder strategy was adopted, utilizing both a human researcher and a large language model (LLM) to analyze the data independently.

Stage 1 was the initial human-led analysis: A trained human research assistant first immersed herself in the entire dataset, which included the anonymized text from the 16 case reports and the transcripts from the 10 interviews. She conducted an initial round of open coding to identify emergent patterns and concepts within the data. Following this, she organized these initial codes into potential themes, guided by the four domains of the CARE model, creating a preliminary thematic map.

Stage 2 implied an independent LLM-powered analysis: To enhance inter-coder reliability and mitigate the potential for single-coder bias, the same anonymized textual dataset was then analyzed by a second coder—Google’s Gemini 2.5 Pro. This model was specifically chosen for its state-of-the-art capabilities, which are highly suited to large-scale textual analysis (Doshi, 2025). A key advantage of Gemini 2.5 Pro is its huge context window (1 million tokens), which allows it to process and reason over the entire data corpus, including all 16 reports and 10 interview transcripts, in a single, coherent pass. This technical capacity is crucial for identifying overarching themes and subtle connections across the full dataset without chunking or segmentation, which can lead to fragmented analysis. The general methodological approach of using an LLM as a second coder is supported by research showing that it can increase the efficiency and reliability of qualitative analysis by mitigating single-researcher subjectivity (Bano et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2023). The LLM was given a specific persona as a qualitative research assistant. The prompt provided the definitions for the four CARE domains and then instructed the model to analyze the entire anonymized data corpus. Its core task was to identify emergent themes from the text, provide a brief definition for each theme, and then organize them under the most appropriate CARE domain. The prompt was designed to be open-ended, explicitly instructing the model to generate themes based solely on patterns found within the provided data and not to introduce external knowledge or preconceived conclusions.

Stage 3 implied triangulation and thematic refinement: The principal investigator performed a triangulation process. For this type of emergent thematic analysis, a qualitative triangulation process was deemed more appropriate for ensuring rigor than a quantitative inter-coder reliability metric. The thematic map generated by the human research assistant was compared against that of the LLM’s. Themes that showed high convergence between both coders were considered robust and were adopted into the final thematic framework. Instances of divergence, where one coder identified a theme that the other did not, or where themes were categorized differently, were flagged. These points of divergence were not treated as errors but as areas requiring deeper interpretive analysis. For example, the divergences were often instructive: The LLM excelled at identifying the frequency and explicit co-occurrence of concepts across the entire dataset (e.g., noting that nearly all kindergartens linked government funding to hiring staff), while the human

coder was more adept at capturing subtle, context-dependent nuances in tone (e.g., distinguishing between principals who spoke of funding as a bureaucratic necessity versus those who saw it as empowering). The author returned to the original data in these specific areas to critically examine the nuances of the text and make the final determination of the thematic structure. This human-in-the-loop approach is important for mitigating the inherent biases in a model's training data. This dual-coder process, combining human interpretive depth with the systematic pattern-recognition capabilities of an LLM, ensures a comprehensive and trustworthy analysis of the data.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

All data collection and analysis procedures adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participating kindergartens and interviewees. All data, including case reports, interview transcripts, and photographs, were fully anonymized prior to analysis to protect the identities of the institutions, staff, and children. This anonymization was performed before any analysis, ensuring that no personally identifiable information was processed by either the human researcher or the LLM.

5. Findings

The data analysis revealed a consistent pattern. Kindergartens that successfully cultivated inclusive environments did not rely on a single initiative but instead implemented a holistic ecosystem of mutually reinforcing strategies. These practices, which aligned with the four domains of the CARE model, demonstrated that effective inclusion was a deliberate, multifaceted, and proactive endeavor.

5.1. Capability: Building an Inclusive Organizational Foundation

The journey toward inclusion began with the deliberate cultivation of internal organizational capabilities. These foundational strengths, encompassing staff expertise, collaborative structures, and school-based curricula, empowered kindergartens to move from well-intentioned ideas to effective, sustainable practice. Proactive kindergartens demonstrated remarkable agency in systematically building this internal capacity.

A primary strategy was a deep and continuous investment in teacher professional development. The data showed a clear pattern of kindergartens sending their staff, from principals to frontline teachers, to specialized training programs (Cases 02, 05, 12, 13, 15, 16). These programs, offered by local universities (Cases 01, 02, 13) and large-scale projects (Cases 01, 04), equipped educators with evidence-based pedagogical knowledge for teaching Chinese as a second language. This training was not a passive exercise; it actively built a shared professional language and collective confidence in tackling the challenges of inclusion.

Importantly, this knowledge was shared throughout the institution through robust internal mechanisms. Kindergartens strategically established a culture of professional growth where expertise was distributed rather than siloed. Leaders who completed advanced courses often served as internal “seed teachers” (Cases 01, 14), sharing their learning through peer observations, collaborative lesson planning, and regular staff sharing sessions (Cases 02, 03). As one case report described, after the principal and director completed a university course, they would “share the teaching skills and key points learned from the course with [all] teachers, to enhance their professional knowledge and skills” (Case 13). This “whole-school participation” model transformed individual training into a collective organizational capability.

Furthermore, these kindergartens built capacity by formalizing their commitment through specialized roles and teams. Many used government subsidies to create dedicated positions such as NCS support teachers or multicultural teaching assistants (Cases 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 15). These staff members provided targeted academic support and were vital cultural liaisons with families. This human infrastructure was often supported by formal teams, such as an “NCS support group” (Case 12) or a dedicated “function group” (Case 04), which brought together specialist teachers and social workers to coordinate support efforts, ensuring that inclusion was a structural priority.

Finally, the most experienced kindergartens solidified their capability through the development of sophisticated school-based curricula and assessment tools. These kindergartens evolved from consumers of generic materials to producers of tailored solutions. For instance, one kindergarten developed a comprehensive, three-tiered system of picture books and assessment instruments for different proficiency levels (Case 14), while another systematically integrated “character component pedagogy” with custom-made learning materials (Case 02). This capacity for curriculum innovation, often built upon a decade or more of experience (Cases 01, 11, 14), signaled a mature and deeply embedded institutional capability. This growing foundation of practical skills and proven strategies appeared to energize the kindergartens’ guiding philosophies, giving them the confidence to embrace an even more ambitious vision for inclusion.

5.2. Aspirations: The Driving Philosophy of Inclusion

Fueled by this growing sense of competence, a robust set of institutional aspirations provided the “why” that gave meaning and direction to the kindergartens’ actions. This guiding philosophy was the engine for their inclusive efforts, giving them the confidence to pursue a higher mission.

First, a core aspiration was an unwavering belief in equal educational rights. Kindergarten leaders consistently articulated a mission of “education for all,” viewing NCS children as integral members of Hong Kong society who deserved every opportunity to succeed (Cases 01, 09, 15). This was strongly conveyed in one case report:

We believe that all children, regardless of their race, religion, or social class, should enjoy the basic right to equal education. Ethnic minority children are also a part of Hong Kong and will participate in building Hong Kong’s future. (Case 01)

Others clarified that commitment persisted regardless of funding fluctuations: “Even if government subsidies were removed, our commitment to admit and teach NCS learners would remain” (Interview 08). This conviction served as a non-negotiable principle that drove decision-making, framing inclusion not as a choice but as a moral imperative.

Second, successful kindergartens intentionally reframed the narrative around diversity, shifting from a mindset of tolerance to one of celebration. Instead of viewing NCS students as a “challenge,” these kindergartens perceived cultural diversity as an invaluable asset for the entire kindergarten community (Cases 03, 13, 16). They aspired to foster mutual respect and enhance the cross-cultural sensitivity of local children (Cases 03, 08). This reframed the “problem” of supporting NCS students into an “opportunity” to enrich the educational experience for all.

Third, these aspirations were grounded in a strategic vision of early intervention. School leaders recognized that the kindergarten years represented a critical window for language acquisition. They believed that providing effective Chinese language support from the outset was essential for adapting to the local curriculum and ensuring a smooth transition to primary schools (Cases 04, 15). This foresight resulted in a clear institutional goal: creating a rich Chinese language environment to build a solid linguistic foundation for long-term academic success.

5.3. Resources: Strategic Mobilization Beyond the School Gate

Proactive kindergartens understood that their internal capabilities and clear vision were amplified exponentially when they acted as strategic brokers, actively drawing in and integrating external resources. They demonstrated significant agency in weaving together support from the government, academia, community organizations, and parents into a multi-layered support network.

The strategic use of government funding served as foundational seed capital. Kindergartens utilized the NCS subsidy provided under the KES to build their core human infrastructure. Reports consistently indicated that this funding was primarily used for hiring additional staff, such as NCS support teachers (Cases 01, 03, 04, 05, 11), purchasing specialized teaching materials like reading pens (Cases 05, 11, 14), and financing cultural inclusion activities (Cases 05, 13). One principal described the difference funding made to the breadth of action: “Without government subsidies, the school would be less proactive with translation, outreach, and searching for external resources” (Interview 11).

With funding, kindergartens actively pursued deep collaborations with universities and professional organizations (Cases 01, 02, 04, 05, 12). They participated in large-scale support programs such as C-for-Chinese@JC (<https://cforchinese-jc.hk>) and Start From the Beginning (<https://kgcsl.edu.hku.hk>). The value of these partnerships extended far beyond free materials; a significant benefit highlighted in the reports was the on-site professional support from university-affiliated experts who engaged in co-planning and lesson observation, directly elevating the quality of instruction (Cases 01, 03, 04).

A third pillar of support was the establishment of a tight-knit community network. Most kindergartens partnered with NGOs to provide on-site social work services (Cases 04, 09, 10, 12, 16). These social workers were invaluable, offering professional counseling, organizing parent workshops, and connecting families with wider community resources and financial aid (Cases 04, 11). This expanded the kindergartens' function from purely educational to holistic family support.

Finally, these kindergartens transformed parents from passive recipients into active partners and resources. They systematically created opportunities for parents to contribute their unique knowledge. Many had established robust parent volunteer teams, inviting NCS parents to share their culture, prepare traditional foods, or assist in school activities (Cases 03, 06, 12, 13). This approach enriched the kindergartens' cultural lives, validated parents' expertise, and empowered them as key contributors.

5.4. Engagement: Putting an Inclusive Vision into Action

The tangible success of these kindergartens lies in their proactive engagement strategies. These concrete actions were the logical culmination of their guiding aspirations, enabled by their internal capabilities and

fueled by the resources they had skillfully mobilized. This was where vision became a reality for every child and family.

5.4.1. Inclusive Pedagogy and Curriculum

Kindergartens strategically engineered a rich and effective Chinese learning environment. They employed differentiated instruction, such as pull-out small groups (Cases 05, 13) and ability-based learning (Case 14), to provide focused support. A key mechanism was peer-mediated learning, where NCS students were paired with Chinese-speaking peers to create authentic, low-stakes communicative situations that formal instruction could not replicate (Cases 07, 09, 14). Learning was made engaging through game-based and drama-based approaches, including role-playing (Case 16) and classroom theater (Case 02), which were supported by innovative teaching aids like reading pens (Cases 09, 14, 16) and teacher-made materials (Cases 02, 10, 16).

5.4.2. Holistic Home-School Partnership

Recognizing language as a barrier, kindergartens implemented a multi-pronged communication strategy. This included direct linguistic support through bilingual staff (Cases 06, 09) and translated school materials (Cases 09, 11, 16). More profoundly, they focused on building trusting relationships through proactive outreach. One kindergarten described its strategy of making “sunshine calls,” where “teachers will periodically call parents every month...to understand the child’s situation at home and let parents know about the child’s learning performance at school” (Case 09). The goal was to establish a positive connection before any problems arose. This was supplemented by home visits (Case 03). Most importantly, they worked to empower parents as educational partners. They achieved this by organizing workshops for NCS parents on supporting Chinese learning at home (Cases 02, 03, 05, 13) and actively involving them in school governance and activities through parent-teacher associations and volunteer teams (Case 03).

5.4.3. Dual-Cultural Validation and Celebration

The engagement strategies revealed a sophisticated process of dual-cultural validation. Kindergartens first validated a child’s home culture through events like International Day, where families shared traditions and food (Cases 09, 12, 16). This built self-esteem and signaled institutional respect. Having established this foundation of security, they then guided students to explore and participate in local traditions, such as celebrating the Chinese New Year (Case 07), visiting a dim sum restaurant (Case 01), or exploring community facilities (Case 13). This dual approach fostered a hybrid identity, allowing children to see themselves as both members of their ethnic group and full members of the Hong Kong community.

5.4.4. Nurturing Emotional Well-being and Confidence

Finally, kindergartens demonstrated that academic learning was intrinsically linked to emotional security. They paid special attention to the initial adaptation period for new students, using strategies like allowing a comfort object from home and decorating the classroom with family photos to create a sense of safety (Case 11). They systematically worked to build student self-confidence throughout their time at the kindergarten. As one report detailed:

The school provides more performance opportunities for NCS children in class and gives them more opportunities to share...so they become more confident in expressing their needs and feelings. (Case 09)

They provided NCS students with frequent opportunities to take on leadership roles and perform in front of their peers (Cases 02, 03, 09, 16), celebrating their successes and empowering them to become confident learners.

5.5. Cross-Domain Dynamics: The CARE Ecosystem in Action

The interplay between the CARE domains is best illustrated through the trajectory of a single kindergarten (Case 04). A clear institutional commitment to “laying a solid Chinese language foundation while ensuring students’ joyful, whole-person development” (aspirations) was matched and further enabled through direct investment in capability, such as hiring specialist teachers and ensuring staff were well-qualified. This strong foundation of intertwined vision and expertise empowered the leadership to broker external resources effectively, securing government funding and NGO partnerships for teacher training and on-site social work. These assets were then converted into concrete Engagement practices, including targeted instruction and robust home-school communication. The positive outcomes created a reinforcing feedback loop: Word-of-mouth reputation led to increased NCS enrollment, and successful new practices like teacher exchanges were institutionalized to support student transitions. This vignette exemplifies the central dynamic observed across the findings: an internal engine, powered by the reciprocal relationship between aspirations and capability, allows a kindergarten to leverage resources for effective engagement. At the same time, this entire process is shaped by boundary conditions, as principals in other contexts noted that factors beyond their control, such as local demographics and a community’s religious profile, can limit student intake despite a kindergarten’s inclusive vision and enthusiasm (Interviews 01 & 08).

6. Discussion

The findings illustrate a clear ecosystem of inclusive practices within proactive kindergartens. This discussion synthesizes these results through the CARE model to interpret their meaning, explores their broader implications for policy and practice in the GBA and beyond, and proposes avenues for future research.

6.1. The CARE Ecosystem: A Dynamic Model of Inclusive Practice

As illustrated in Figure 1, the central argument emerging from this study is that successful inclusion is not achieved through piecemeal initiatives but through a synergistic “ecosystem” where capability, aspirations, resources, and engagement are deeply interconnected and reinforce each other. This model provides a direct, practice-based answer to the systemic barriers of human resource deficits, poor home-school communication, and institutional isolation that our foundational survey identified (Wong et al., 2022). The CARE ecosystem, in effect, serves as an operational blueprint for the “dynamic whole-school supportive structure that embraced heterogeneity,” which Wong (2023) identified as essential for success in multicultural educational settings. It is also a powerful manifestation of the strength-based approach (Saleebey, 2012) that this study adopted, consciously moving away from the deficit thinking that often characterizes discussions around minority education (Valencia, 2010).

In this ecosystem, capability and aspirations reinforce each other in a virtuous loop. Small wins in practice (for example, more parents taking part or children using Cantonese during play) boost staff confidence and strengthen the kindergarten's shared purpose. That stronger purpose then justifies and motivates further investment in staff skills and tools. This internal momentum, in turn, makes it easier to mobilize external Resources and to engage parents as active partners who contribute their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). These pieces come together in concrete engagement. Engagement is not the endpoint; it feeds back into the system by building new skills, reaffirming values, and widening resource networks. This reinforcing effect was also strongly affirmed in our foundational survey, where respondents commonly agreed that supporting NCS students and parents helped increase their capability (90.8%), aspirations (97.7%), and resources (88.4%; see Wong et al., 2022). Over time, these feedback loops make the whole system more resilient and adaptive.

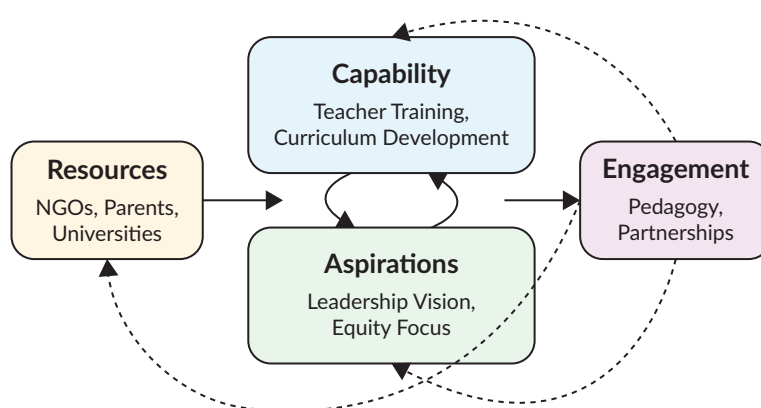


Figure 1. The CARE ecosystem of inclusion as a dynamic system.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions and Framing of the CARE Model

To ground this framework in established theory, the CARE model can be understood as an application of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the specific context of school-level inclusion. The internal capability and aspirations represent the core of the school's microsystem. The mobilization of resources and the practice of engagement reflect the critical processes in the mesosystem, where the school actively connects with families, community organizations, and other institutions. Government policy, such as the KES, acts as a key feature of the exosystem influencing the school's operations. Furthermore, the virtuous cycle between capability and aspirations can be seen as a form of organizational learning, where early successes foster a collective efficacy that encourages the institution to move from single-loop learning (improving existing strategies) to double-loop learning (questioning and reshaping the core mission and values of the school itself).

This theoretical view maps directly onto what the cases show in practice. Inclusive pedagogy appears in teachers' high expectations coupled with concrete supports, instead of separating children into "additional needs" groups (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). UDL is visible in routines that give children multiple ways to join in, understand, and express themselves (Meyer et al., 2014). Day-to-day peer-buddy work and brief translanguaging moments create frequent, low-pressure chances to use Cantonese while building a sense of belonging and hybrid identity (García & Wei, 2014; Gu & Tong, 2021). At the mesosystem level, leaders act as brokers: They turn policy subsidies, university partnerships, and NGO support into stable capacity, not

one-off activities. In short, the microsystem (capability and aspirations) and mesosystem (resources and engagement) operate together, exactly as ecological theory would predict, and the observed feedback between small wins and renewed commitment aligns with organizational learning.

The primary theoretical contribution of the CARE model lies less in the novelty of its parts and more in how it integrates them and explains their reciprocal effects. CARE highlights how capability and aspirations fuel each other, how resources are brokered to support engagement, and how engagement feeds back to strengthen the whole. This dynamic view shifts attention from “what schools have” to “how schools grow” over time.

6.3. Lessons for the GBA and Beyond

The findings from these Hong Kong kindergartens offer a useful model of social integration for other rapidly diversifying urban contexts, particularly within China’s GBA. While cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou face similar challenges of cultural diversity and de facto segregation (Haugen, 2019; Hu, 2025; Xie et al., 2023), the “one country, two systems” framework requires a nuanced approach to policy learning. The key lesson is not to copy specific activities but to adapt the underlying principles of the CARE model. For instance, this could involve practical actions such as piloting mentor-school networks that connect experienced institutions with those newer to the challenge, focusing on shared issues like home-school language gaps and the risk of segregation. Another possible action would be to create recognized micro-credentials in early years Chinese as a Second Language to build teacher capability systematically. Both initiatives, however, would need to be co-designed with local communities to ensure cultural and linguistic fit, embodying the adaptive spirit of the CARE model itself.

This focus on adapting core principles, instead of replicating specific activities, is precisely what gives the model its global relevance. The challenge of overcoming “de facto segregation” (Gao, 2023; Siriboe & Harfitt, 2017) and its detrimental impact on language acquisition and social integration remains a persistent issue in multicultural cities worldwide. The principles embedded in the CARE model are easily transferable. The strategy of “dual-cultural validation,” for instance, offers a sophisticated pedagogical approach to fostering the hybrid identities that characterize successful integration in multicultural societies (Gu & Tong, 2021; Ward et al., 2018; Wong & Wong, 2024). It illustrates how schools can simultaneously affirm a child’s heritage while cultivating a sense of belonging within the host community. While specific activities must be adapted to local contexts, the core process of building internal capacity, aligning it with institutional values, and utilizing community assets provides a robust and universally applicable framework for advancing the United Nations’ goal of equitable and inclusive education for all (UNESCO, 2017).

6.4. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings generate several actionable implications for policymakers and practitioners serious about moving from rhetoric to reality in educational equity.

For policy, the primary lesson is the need to evolve beyond financial subsidies as the sole instrument of change. While funding is a critical enabler, it is insufficient on its own, a conclusion that reinforces critiques of earlier, less holistic voucher schemes (Wong & Rao, 2022). A more sophisticated policy approach would focus on building systemic capacity. For instance, creating government-funded “mentor kindergarten”

programs would institutionalize the transfer of best practices from exemplary institutions to those beginning their inclusion journey. However, for such an initiative to be effective and fair, it needs to be designed considering practical realities. It would require a dedicated funding stream integrated into existing ECE budgets. There should also be clear incentives for participating mentor staff, such as professional development credits, salary recognition, or workload adjustments. Moreover, it is important to have a targeted allocation mechanism to ensure that marginalized and under-resourced schools have priority access. Similarly, to address the persistent human resource deficit, policy could move to professionalize the role of multicultural support staff. This means creating dedicated career pathways and recognized salary scales, transforming what is often a temporary position into a sustainable and valued profession within the education ecosystem.

Although such a top-down policy is necessary to create an enabling environment, the findings reaffirm that its success depends on bottom-up practice and visionary leadership. For school leaders, the CARE model can serve as a diagnostic and strategic planning tool. They can use its four domains to self-assess their institution's strengths and weaknesses, identifying, for example, whether a lack of engagement stems from a deficit in capability or a weakness in external resources. The entire CARE ecosystem is predicated on the aspirations set by principals and their management teams, who must possess what Wong (2023) terms a "global vision and an open mind" (p. 15) to champion an unwavering institutional commitment to equity. This framework encourages leaders to see parents not as a communication challenge but as essential partners and to foster a whole-school culture where inclusivity is the foundation of all practice, not a peripheral program.

6.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study's insights should be considered in light of its limitations, which in turn illuminate critical directions for future inquiry. The sample consisted of self-selected kindergartens participating in an award scheme, which likely represents a "best-case scenario" of proactive and well-resourced institutions. While studying these exemplars is critical for establishing an empirical benchmark of what is possible within the current policy environment, it risks portraying inclusion as a matter of simply replicating "best practices" without addressing the systemic barriers, such as funding disparities and high staff turnover, that may render such strategies impractical for the average kindergarten. The findings, therefore, should be seen as a "proof of concept" rather than a representation of the typical experience. The findings also rely on the kindergartens' self-reported data; even though interviews provided a layer of validation, the perspectives were primarily those of the educators. The absence of the direct voices of NCS parents and children also means that claims about the success of "holistic home-school partnerships" and "dual-cultural validation" are viewed through the lens of the institution providing the service, not the family receiving it.

These limitations point to several important avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are urgently needed to track the long-term academic and social-emotional outcomes of NCS children who experience these holistic inclusion models. Does this strong foundation translate into sustained success in primary school and beyond? Second, research that explicitly centers the voices and experiences of NCS parents and children is crucial for a more complete and detailed understanding of the home-school partnership and the lived reality of inclusion. Third, comparative studies of inclusive practices in other GBA cities, such as Shenzhen or Macau, would provide invaluable insights into how different policy and social contexts shape school-level strategies. Building on the nature of our sample, future research could also

explore the differential transferability of the CARE components, distinguishing between high-investment elements (e.g., hiring specialist staff) and low-cost, high-impact elements (e.g., cultivating inclusive aspirations) that may be more readily adopted by institutions facing greater financial constraints. Finally, future work should explore the professional identities, challenges, and career trajectories of the multicultural teaching staff who form the human infrastructure of these inclusive ecosystems, yet whose own experiences remain largely unexamined.

7. Conclusion

This study moved beyond a diagnosis of systemic barriers to illuminate a pathway toward genuine educational equity. The research revealed that successful inclusion is not the product of isolated programs but of a dynamic institutional ecosystem. The proactive cultivation of internal capability, driven by clear aspirations, amplified by external resources, and realized through meaningful engagement, creates a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement. The CARE model offers more than a set of best practices; it provides a replicable framework for any institution committed to transforming inclusive policy from a noble intention into a lived reality. The work taking place in these kindergartens goes far beyond their classroom walls. They nurture the next generation of global citizens and lay the essential groundwork for socially sustainable and harmonious societies, a core objective for the GBA and the world.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

The LLM Google Gemini 2.5 Pro was used in this study. Its role was to act as the second coder in a dual-coder thematic analysis framework. The LLM independently analyzed the entire anonymized textual corpus (16 case reports and 10 interview transcripts) to generate a thematic map based on the study's analytical framework. This LLM-generated map was then triangulated with the map created by the human coder to enhance the reliability and validity of the final thematic analysis.

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