

The Predicament and Transcendence of Inclusive Education in Chinese Primary Schools: What Can School Leaders Do?

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a new trend in the development of international special education. In terms of the historical development of inclusive education in China, it has been actively promoted at the national level since the founding of contemporary new China, particularly at the level of national policies and legal frameworks. However, this paper highlights that there are still many complex and contradictory challenges between the "positive" developments in policies and the "negative" educational practices of inclusive education. These challenges are particularly magnified when facing the situation that dealing with the relationship between children with special needs and their typical peers by teachers, parents and peers. Based on this, the article proposes a three-dimensional linkage model suitable for Chinese school education, attempting to provide a possible theoretical framework for furthering the practice of inclusive education. Finally, we wish to point out that the transition from segregated special education to inclusive education is not only a transformative attempt in the perspective of educational thinking, but also a kind of reflection and exploration of the meaning of education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education, Chinese Education, Leadership, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is the current international development trend of special education, and the core is to ensure the equity of education quality. Inclusive education is a new idea that emerged in the field of international special education in the early 1990s. It was also adopted by UNESCO at the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994 (Kiuppis, 2014). The core ideas of the Salamanca Declaration and the Program of Action for Special Needs Education are, regardless of the physical, intellectual, emotional, language and other conditions, every general education school must accept all children in the service area (Pather, 2019).

According to China's National Disability Survey in 1987, nearly 5% of China's population belonged to the disabled group (51.64 million), and school-age children accounted for about 16% of the total disabled population (817 million). The data show that less than 0.07% (57,600) of school-age children receive

education (Deng & Guo, 2007). Since the 1990s, China's special schools and special classes have gradually increased. In 1998, the number of special classes in mainstream schools increased to 6,148. However, the data declined after 2009, and the number of special classes dropped to about 700 (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). The reasons for the decrease include the decrease in the number of students caused by the one-child policy and the difficulty of teachers' ability to meet the needs of children with different degrees of special needs. Therefore, children with special needs are proposed to be redistributed to mainstream schools to learn together with other peers, and the Learning in Regular Class (LRC) policy came into being.

Development and Related Policies and Legal Frameworks in Contemporary China

China's "Compulsory Education Law" stipulates that regardless of "gender, race, ethnicity, family socioeconomic status or religious beliefs", all children receive nine years of free compulsory education from the age of 6 (Chinese National

People's Congress, 1986). This policy has undoubtedly expanded the educated group, enabling more children to enjoy equal educational opportunities. However, what about the compulsory education rights of disabled children?

As early as the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China established some special schools to provide educational services for students with hearing and vision impairments (Yang & Wang, 1994, as cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). China's first compulsory education law was passed in 1986. "The law stipulates that the state must establish special schools/classes for school-age children with visual impairment, hearing impairment or intellectual disability" (Deng & Harris, 2008, as cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Meanwhile, the problem that accompanies China's huge population is that special education schools (institutions) cannot accommodate all special children. Therefore, Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) was proposed and legalized by the National People's Congress of China in 2006 and 2008, and children with mild or moderate disabilities (such as learning disabilities, emotional disorders, sensory disorders) became beneficiaries (An et al., 2018). This means that some disabled children can study in regular classes in ordinary schools. The LRC model is designed by the government to provide disabled children in need of special education with the opportunity to study with non-disabled peers in regular schools (Deng & Manset, 2000, as cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). This policy also initially promoted the further development of inclusive education in China. To promote the compulsory education of all children, especially the compulsory education of disabled children under the LRC model, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the "Special Education Improvement Action" (SEIA, 2014, as cited in An et al., 2018). The promulgation of this policy once again emphasized that all students have the right to receive education, especially children with disabilities. The critical tasks of the policy are to expand the scale of compulsory education for children with disabilities, actively develop non-compulsory special education and increase the investment in special education funding and infrastructure.

The gradual development of the above policies demonstrates China's exploration and correction of compulsory education for disabled children.

This process is not only the evolution of education policy but also a search for education justice and a change of attitude. From the establishment of schools for the disabled to the initial tentative push towards inclusive education, the Government is beginning to realize that the education that children with disabilities should receive should be more than just an opportunity to learn. Instead, it should be an opportunity to learn in the same educational conditions as all other children of the same age. However, we can still clearly see that in the process of China's education policy for children with disabilities, it is always challenging to achieve inclusive education in the process of continuous attempts to achieve educational equity. Hu, Wang and Fei (2012) pointed out that children with disabilities in China cannot receive an education because of the geographical area, resources, unspecified degree of disability and professional level of teachers. Deng (2008) also emphasized that the education of disabled children in rural areas has not yet been resolved.

The Dilemma of Inclusive Education in China

Teachers' Perspective

Inclusive education has increased the complexity of the student population faced by Chinese elementary school teachers. Under the LRC education system, teachers' daily teaching work needs to include attention to children with disabilities. When teachers use inclusive education practices to solve teaching problems for children with disabilities, the classroom is a powerful space (Wang et al., 2015). However, current research shows that most Chinese primary school teachers maintain a negative or cautious attitude towards inclusive education (Malinen et al., 2012).

The difficulties encountered by teachers in implementing inclusive education include four aspects. At first, there is a lack of training and experience in special education. Many teachers in ordinary community schools say that they do not know how to take care of children with special needs in the normal teaching process. While, they do not know how to adjust teaching methods, including teaching rhythm and content, to meet the needs of exceptional children in the class (Peng, 2011). Next, it is difficult for teachers to communicate with special children. Facing children with hearing and intellectual disabilities, teachers who have

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not received special education training are often unable to establish regular communication with them and thus cannot assist these children (Peng, 2011; Deng & Harris, 2008). Meanwhile, teachers lack the cooperation and support of parents of children with special educational needs. Some parents cannot accept the teacher's judgment on the children's special educational needs and even have resistance and violent opposition to the teacher's educational suggestions (Peng, 2011). In addition to this, teachers also expressed disappointment that the increased workload of special education beyond regular teaching has not been supported and recognized by the schools (Poon-Mcbrayer & Wong, 2013).

Parents' Attitudes

In China, parents of children with disabilities have complex attitudes towards the education of their children. Parents with negative attitudes will choose to send their children to special schools for special education (Hu et al., 2012). They believe that children with disabilities cannot receive regular education, and it is even more challenging to integrate into regular peer groups and even society. Such parents will specialize and disadvantage children with "avoidance" and "protection" mentality from the beginning (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). They may never consider the issue of education equity.

Some parents hold a fierce protest attitude. Some of them will refuse to admit their children's disability issues, refuse to accept the school's opinions, and strongly oppose the school's special education recommendations for their children (Deng & Harris, 2008). They believe that if they do not recognize that their children are "special", they can get the same education as other peers. Some parents who hold such views believe that the child's "special" is temporary and can become "normal". Nevertheless, such an attitude is detrimental to both educators and children with special needs, especially children. This attitude of ignoring disability is also a manifestation of a lack of respect and distortion of the meaning of fairness (Szeto et al., 2020).

Finally, other parents believe that education is not an essential concern for children with disabilities (Peng, 2011). They are more inclined to care about their children's daily lives, ensure that their children's basic life needs are met, and their expectations of their children stay at the

level that their children can take care of themselves. Therefore, even if their children can obtain equal educational opportunities under the education policy, they may not contribute to their children's school education (Poon-Mcbrayer & Wong, 2013).

Attitudes of Peers

One of the core concepts of integrated education is to allow children with special needs and typically developing peers to experience the social welfare of ordinary schools. Therefore, the interaction and friendship between children with special needs and typically developing peers in ordinary schools have become assumptions for this educational purpose (Flam & Keller, 2000).

However, apparent differences may prevent children with special needs from communicating regularly with their peers. For example, mentally disabled children develop slowly from language to behaviour and their communication skills and body language lag behind those of their typical peers. Therefore, from the perspective of children with special needs, they may not have an awareness of peer interaction or avoid communicating with peers because of inferiority and timidity (Peng, 2011).

On the other hand, the cognitive abilities of typically developing peers are limited, and their cognition is in the initial stage of formation and development, which means that they will be curious about children with special needs, observe and even imitate the attitude of others towards children with special needs (Malti & Latzko, 2010; de Boer, 2012). For example, if teachers respond to children with special needs and typical peers with different attitudes, then typically peers will also mark children with special needs as a "different" group. Once this sense of distinction is formed, friendship will be challenging to establish, and it may even lead to discrimination and violence against children with special needs (de Boer, 2012; Flem & Keller, 2000).

DISCUSSION

In "The Sociological Imagination", American sociologist Wright Mills mentions a central point: sociological research cannot be divorced from its historical dimension (Mills & Gitlin, 2000). Meanwhile, a significant issue in sociological research in education is the relationship between education and politics,

economy, and culture. Therefore, the discussion of contemporary Chinese society's attitude toward inclusive education cannot be separated from a brief analysis of China's relevant historical and cultural connotations. When it comes to Chinese society's attitudes toward the education of people with disabilities, it is necessary to talk about Confucianism, which has permeated Chinese education for millennia.

Social ethics and moral perspectives are intertwined in Confucianism with social attitudes toward special populations such as people with disabilities, rooted in Chinese social consciousness (Liaw, 1992). In terms of social attitudes toward people with disabilities, Confucian philosophy presents a conflicting ideology. On the one hand, from a historical perspective, the ancient Chinese feudal system promoted the educational goal of producing systematically managed elites. People with disabilities were destined to be at the bottom of society from the beginning, so they could not access education, only social welfare (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). "Sympathy" and "helping" people with disabilities are the most common social attitudes. These attitudes come from "Ren," one of the cores of Confucianism (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). "Ren" advocates for people to care for and respect others to create a harmonious and kind society. On the other hand, some parts of Confucianism advocate that people's disabilities are punishments sent from heaven, and such a view creates social discrimination against people with disabilities and their families (Zhang, 2014).

On the surface, the social attitude of "sympathy" inherited by Confucianism is friendly and powerful to children with disabilities, but can it be the same as the "fairness" advocated by inclusive education? First, the core concept of inclusive education is "inclusiveness" (Malinen et al., 2012). As Shaeffer proposed in 2019, the word "inclusiveness" in education has a unique and vital meaning from a historical point of view. Words such as "mainstreaming" and "integration" were once used to describe the situation of children with special needs entering ordinary schools from families or special schools. However, "entering" refers to children with special needs being included in ordinary classrooms, which does not mean that they are free from the fate of being excluded from classroom learning (Shaeffer, 2019). In other words, the education system focuses on realizing the physical integration of children

with special needs in the classroom and is satisfied with the way they realize their right to education. However, the gap between the school environment, values, teaching methods, and children's fundamental needs with special needs is often overlooked (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Another voice comes from the research of Dyson (2001) and his colleagues. The inclusive education strategy for children with special needs is highly politicized. The description of the difficulties and needs of children with special needs comes from their relevant stakeholders, including parents, educators, policymakers, who replace the voices of children with special needs. Then, the lens that examines the plight of integrated education becomes based on "individual" (features of children with special needs) rather than "curriculum" (the possibility of imbalance in the school education system) (Gross, 1996; John & Patricia, 2018). This also means that the starting point for meeting "special needs" is to fill, not reform.

If educators regard the education of persons with disabilities as a social charity, then inclusive education becomes a subsidiary product of mainstream education, similar to a kind of "charity" wrapped in social care. The mainstream consciousness of educators is centred on general education. After ensuring that the typical peers in the class receive the education, they will pay attention to children with special needs (Gümüş et al., 2021). Therefore, education equity may have been ignored by society from the beginning. We need to think about whether "sympathy" is based on denying the fair rights of the people with disabilities group.

POSSIBLE STRATEGY

Three-Dimensional Linkage Strategy

Equality of opportunity in distributing inclusive education resources means that everyone has an equal opportunity to receive an education. It is the core and most important, including equal opportunities for receiving education, equal opportunities for participating in the educational process, equal opportunities for educational achievements, and the impact of educational achievements on future life prospects (Shaeffer, 2019). Ordinary schools and special schools coexist, so it is not easy to realize a comprehensive school that combines general

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education and special education. As the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education put forward in 2008, inclusive education is challenging. Interrelated actions are needed to remove obstacles, from reforms in education policy, teacher capacity and training to multi-level material supply. All aspects must be linked together (Thompson et al., 2015).

Therefore, the author tried to put forward a

"three-dimensional linkage strategy for inclusive education in primary schools". This strategy is intended to start from the three dimensions of school leaders, teacher groups and expert support and establish a mutually supportive linkage system within the school education community. Its purpose is to help marginalized children with special needs integrate into ordinary schools.

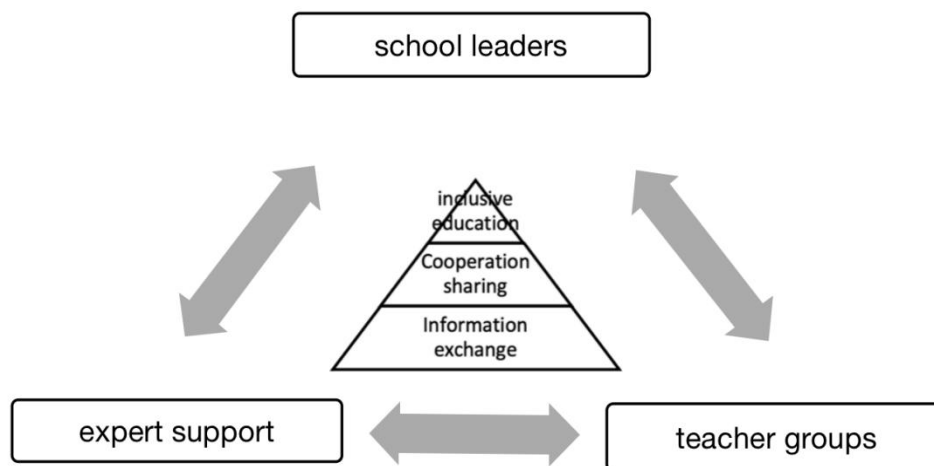


Figure1: Three-dimensional linkage strategy

Professional Partnership between School Leaders and Teachers

The communication skills of school leaders are the essential skills for performing duties, and definite communication skills can improve the executive ability of leaders (Barrett, 2006 quoted from Poon-Mcbrayer & Wong, 2013). Meanwhile, if school leaders and teachers establish a partnership of mutual respect and trust, they may form a common goal. This benign relationship is conducive to school leaders mobilizing teachers to practice inclusive education (Poon-Mcbrayer & Wong, 2013).

The principal can promote inclusive education in primary schools by establishing two-way work support with the teaching team. First, school leaders should provide teacher groups with opportunities for active dialogue to convey inclusive education policies and understand children's educational experience with special needs in regular classes. Meanwhile, regular communication can also create opportunities for school leaders to supervise and change school policies. Feedback and thinking based on

educational experience are the targets of change. In addition, school leaders have the responsibility to form teacher cooperation groups. As the leader, education leaders need to consider the mutual benefit relationship and decision-making efficiency within the cooperation group, including the members' professional identity, educational experience, and professional ethics (Vernon-Dotson, 2008).

Professional Partnership of Teacher Cooperation Group

Teamwork is conducive to teachers' self-efficacy and enthusiasm for taking responsibility for work, and thus, under the guidance of the principal, they move towards a bottom-up education management approach (Vernon-Dotson, 2008). Especially in an extensive class system like Chinese elementary schools, this kind of education management method may empower some teachers, thereby promoting the initiative of inclusive education (Wang et al., 2015).

Ideally, the composition of this group should include special education coordinators, teachers

with inclusive classroom experience, and novice teachers. This hierarchical design ensures that team members can solve problems with each other as much as possible and timely understand the emerging special education problems, trying to make up for the lack of training for novice teachers. In China, inclusive education is also in its infancy in many other countries, so inclusive education training for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers has become a shortcoming that cannot be ignored (Malinen et al., 2012; Gümüş et al., 2021). Teachers often feel powerless when facing abnormal behaviours or communication problems of children with special needs in the class. At this time, most teachers' "avoidance" behaviour will prevent children with special needs from participating in regular learning (Armstrong, 1995). As an independent individual, each teacher may feel powerless when faced with such work problems. However, if teachers can form a group and face this problem positively, it may help them better understand special children and find solutions to help them integrate into the group.

Communication and information exchange within the group is a two-way facilitating factor. For coordinators with special education expertise, they can directly understand the school education situation of inclusive education to conduct further investigation and research on the current implementation of inclusive education. For teachers, they can have a deeper understanding of the current inclusive education policy.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education can be described as a leap in the development of special education. From the perspective of education equity, the emergence and development of integrated education guide the transformation of special education from welfare to rights. This paper explains the history and development of special education in primary schools in China, reveals the situation and challenges of integrated education in China from the perspective of different stakeholders. Finally, based on the Chinese context, this paper also provides a possible theoretical framework for the further realization of integrated education and proposes a three-dimensional linkage model suitable for school education. In addition, the significance of inclusive education in achieving educational equity is still worthy of continued discussion in the academic community. Children with special needs should

not live at the mercy of others. They should develop their potential as independent individuals and realize their ideals in the same educational environment. The transition from segregated special education to inclusive education is a change in educational thinking, and it is also a reflection and reform of the meaning of education.

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