

China Policy on Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of recent developments in special education in China . A major change was made by redefining special education as an integral part of compulsory education and by making the education system more inclusive . Government intervention , through legislation and regulation , as well as other effective approaches , was adopted to improve educational services . The results were evident both in the implementation of classroom integration and in the increase in numbers of children enrolled in schools . China`s experience may have some value to other less developed countries who seek alternatives to provide better educational services for children with disabilities .

INTRODUCTION

From ancient times, caring for children with disabilities was seen as society`s responsibility in China . This fact is well recorded in ancient classics . However, education was not provided for these children until the founding of the first school for the blind in 1874 and the first school for the deaf in 1887 . Thus, special education in China has a history of over a hundred years .

In China special education refers to education for children with disabilities . The definition of `disabled` is based on official definitions given in the 1987 National Survey on the Status of the Disabilities (NSSD) . This survey grouped disabilities into six categories : visually impaired , hearing and / or speech impaired , mentally retarded, physically handicapped , emotionally disturbed and multiply disabled . In addition , the law on Basic Protection for the Disabled Person (BPDP) 1991 defines eight categories of disability , using hearing impairment , speech impairment and ` other disabilities ` as three further categories .

According to the NSSD . China`s 1.1 billion population has more than 51 million people with disabilities . That is to say , 4.9% of the population , or one in every 20 people , has a handicapping condition . The survey also showed that 18.1% of families , in other words , one in five , had a member with a disability . Consequently , providing necessary services for these people is seen as a way of helping them to fulfill their membership of society . These kinds of services and facilities not only affect the quality of life for individuals with disabilities , but also have an impact on their family members . So this can be seen as a great project of social development and evolution. Consequently, in the last decade, special education in China has been enhanced by the government through both legislation and by action for the sake of meeting the needs of the population with disabilities.

THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

It has been stated in legislation and related regulations that the government should provide education for children with disabilities. Article 45 of the Constitution states that 'the nation and society should arrange employment, living, and education for the blind, the deaf, and the other disabled citizens'. Previously the Guideline for the Reform of Schooling System, adopted by the State Council in 1951 had stated that 'all levels of the people's governments should set up special schools for the education of children, youth, and adults with sensory or physical disabilities'. In 1986 the right to education for children with disabilities was re-emphasised in the Compulsory Education Act (Beijing Normal University, 1987), by the statement that 'all level of governments are responsible in setting up special schools and special classes for disabled children and youths'. From the above statements it can be seen that, on the one hand, the government has the responsibility to provide education for children with disabilities and, on the other hand, children with disabilities have the right to receive services in education

and better living. At that time programmes such as special schools or special classes were considered as possible measures for offering these services.

However, based on data for 1987, it was demonstrated that the educational right of children with disabilities had not been put into practice completely. Of the 309.5 million children aged under 15 as calculated by the NSSD, 8.1735 million or 2.66% had some form of disability. Its further estimation was that more than 6 million of this group were of school age. It was these children that needed special education services and they became targets of national policies for making education universal. In the light of these data, the education system was confronted with four issues.

First of all, it was clear that educational opportunity for children was unequal. It was estimated that only 55.2% of school aged children with disabilities received education, while the corresponding figure for children with no disabilities was 97%. Additionally, an investigation of adult illiteracy showed that 20.6% of the whole population were illiterate, but 66.37% or two thirds of those with disabilities had the same problem. All of this indicated that children with disabilities and adults had not received their right to education.

Secondly, statistics showed that less than 1% (0.9%) of children with disabilities receiving education were enrolled in special schools, with the majority of them (54.3%) enrolled in regular schools. If we wanted to emphasise the quality of special education, then curriculum changes and school reforms had to be seen as the most important methods for improvement of educational services to meet the urgent needs of children with disabilities. As for those children with no school (44.8%), they were kept at home or in welfare institutions. Therefore, attention had to be paid not only to their educational services, but also to the quality of their life. Furthermore, it was urged that a nation-wide reform of education could help to provide more opportunities for education of high quality. The schooling conditions for school age children with a disability are summarized in Table I.

Table I. Schooling conditions of children with disabilities (percentages), as of 1987

Categories	Regular	Special	No schooling
Visually impaired	41.8	1.0	57.0
Hearing/language impaired	41.5	3.6	55.0
Mentally handicapped	61.0	0.5	38.0
Physically handicapped	59.9	0	39.8
Emotionally disturbed	41.0	0	58.8
Multiply handicapped	16.5	1.1	82.4
All children with disabilities	54.2	1.0	44.8

Thirdly, there was seen to be a great discrepancy for children with disabilities between their perceived needs and available facilities. In fact, there existed 458 special schools and 576 special classes in 1987, only serving 52,876 children, i.e. less than 1% of the 6 million children in need of services. These data indicated that the idea of trying to provide special education in separate schools was bound to meet a dead end in a developing country such as China, with its massive population and limited resources. Under such circumstances, more flexible alternatives had to be developed in order to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities.

Finally, whilst it may not be difficult to draw up policy documents, it is much more difficult to put these into practice. So action for the realization of the policies had to play a crucial role in the development of new special education responses. Put simply, there had to be powerful strategies for supporting their implementation.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

In the light of this analysis of the unsatisfactory elements in provision for the education of children with

disabilities, the first national conference on special education was held in 1988. The quality and opportunity of education for children with disabilities were broadly discussed at this gathering. Delegates to the conference agreed that in order to provide education for children with disabilities firm action had to be taken in order to address the following issues:

- (1) changing people's negative attitude towards children with disabilities;
- (2) exploiting resources for the development of special education;
- (3) offering alternatives for providing educational services to children with disabilities;
- (4) coordinating the various departments in providing services to children with disabilities;
- (5) personnel training for special education.

Indeed, these conclusions formed the basis for the document *Guideline for the Development of Special Education* (People's Education Publishing, 1990). As a result, adjustments were made in drawing up legislation, regulations and policies for people with disabilities in subsequent years, e.g. the Law on Basic Protection of the Disabled, The Educational Act for the Disabled, National Five Year Projects for the Disabled, 1988-1992, 1993-1998, 1998-2003 , and the Eighth Five-Year Programme for Special Education (FPSE), 1991-1995; the ninth FPSE 1996-2000; the tenth FPSE 2001-2005.

These regulations and legislation indicated that the Chinese government and, indeed, the general public had become much more aware of the urgency of providing educational services for all children with disabilities. Furthermore, there was evidence that they would commit themselves to support this noble cause. It can be seen, therefore, that the above legislation marked an epoch making era in promoting educational opportunity and quality for children with disabilities in recent years.

The general goals for the development of special education are documented in the Law on Basic Protection for the Disabled and are stated as follows:

- (1) The goal for special education development should combine popularisation with the raising of overall standards;
- (2) Compulsory education and vocational training should enjoy top priority;
- (3) vigorous action should be taken for developing early intervention programmes;
- (4) Secondary and post secondary education should be developed step by step.

Therefore, it is clear that national policy is to increase equal opportunity and to improve the quality of education for children with disabilities. However, the main obstacle remains one of attitude of mind. Often we hear empty platitudes, such as: "Yes, these children should be in school, but there is no..." In practice I would argue that opportunity for education and programme accessibility should be placed as the first priorities. This viewpoint is confirmed by a Chinese saying: "when things reach a certain quantity, then there is quality". Our experience was that in the course of increasing school enrolment of children with disabilities, major changes were brought about by re-defining special education as being both compulsory and inclusive. I will consider these two aspects in more detail.

The Compulsory Aspect

Making special education compulsory required a major thrust towards the unification of education provision. It means that special education is identified as an integral part of compulsory education, as well as an integral part of education as a whole. These policies demanded that special education and compulsory education should be unified in planning, leadership, strategies and evaluation of implementation procedures. Along with this policy, special education had to be included in the regular inspection of basic education provision. In order to put this policy into effect a 'no pass' rule was introduced. 'No pass' means that a local education administration cannot say that compulsory education has been completed in its region unless all children with disabilities enter school. This policy is revolutionary in the calculation of school enrolment in China, in that it adds children with disabilities into the equation. In the past, school enrolment was calculated by dividing the number of children actually in schools by the total number of children who could be in school but not including those with special needs. Now the formula has been changed so that the number of children in school is divided by all children including those with special needs. This change indicates that there is no longer tolerance for attitudinal indifference to children with special needs.

These management changes have increased the school enrolment rate of children with disabilities significantly. By 1994 it was estimated that more than 60% of children with disabilities were enrolled in schools. This was a great leap from 6% reported in 1986. Further, the majority of these children received their education in regular schools. Therefore, this change has also begun the process of transforming regular schools from being largely 'exclusive' into being more 'inclusive'.

The Inclusive Aspect

Inclusive schools can be seen as the most effective means of extending educational opportunity to all children with disabilities. In this respect, an inclusive school means no rejection for school admission. According to this policy, schools at all levels, from kindergarten to higher education, are not allowed to reject pupils with disabilities because of their handicapping condition.

Inclusive programmes mean attention to the multiple levels of education services. In finding educational opportunity for children with disabilities, schools at all levels are requested to adopt an open door policy. State schools, either regular or special, are urged to offer programmes for children with special needs. Indeed, these schools together set up a network of three levels of educational services in which the special school becomes a resource centre linking with programmes offered in regular school, including special classes and integrated classes.

In these ways an inclusive education system is developed that involves multiple channels of education provision. Due to inadequate funding, state schools cannot fully satisfy the needs of children with disabilities. In reality the State Education Commission alone cannot provide the wide range of services to meet the needs of those with disabilities. Consequently, all government sectors and non-governmental agencies are encouraged to help provide services to children with disabilities. For instance, institutions funded by the Civil Affairs Ministry provide services such as welfare institutes for children with severe disabilities who were mostly abandoned by parents because of their profound and multiple handicapping condition at birth. The welfare institutes also provide day care services for toddlers. Similarly, the China Federation for Disabled Persons offers rehabilitation programmes for individuals and vocational training programmes for adults. Additionally, the number of private schools and organisations has been increasing considerably in urban areas.

EDUCATIONAL CHANGES IN PRACTICE

It must be remembered, of course, that although China has a long and unique history, with a rich culture and ideologies, it is still a developing country. On the way towards educational change lots of problems were confronted. Our classrooms are usually crowded with children, ranging from 40 to 75 in number. Often, there are few teaching aids available, and teachers are overworked and underpaid. Also, it is important to note that teaching styles in most schools are formal in comparison with developed countries and there is a unified curriculum and standard text books. Furthermore, standardised school evaluation and student assessment procedures are applied in each local educational system. Little or no materials and resources are provided either to teachers or students.

Given these realities, the task of providing opportunities for education of high quality for all children in such a vast and over-populated country as China is a great challenge. In view of these circumstances, support has been emphasised in the national policy and it is pleasing that the documents concerned are being produced and changes are being realised. In reforming schools for inclusiveness, therefore, effective measures have to be taken to overcome problems that still exist.

There are, for example, many attitudinal problems that must be addressed. For example, the majority of Chinese people still believe that as a developing country we will not be able to provide education for children with disabilities until the so-called 'normal children' all receive an education. Furthermore, there are considerable doubts about the learning capabilities of children with disabilities. Learning is seen as being about acquiring academic knowledge and skills. Learning for living and self care are perceived as being the function of home education and given little consideration in schools. By holding this attitude in mind a conclusion is made that children with disabilities will not learn in school. Thus, keeping a child with a

disability at home seems to be reasonable and, indeed, convenient for some people.

Up until the last two decades, for almost a century children with disabilities only attended special schools supported either by different religious or social welfare organisations. Realising that such children should attend school and the educational organisations should assume major responsibility for their educational needs was in itself a major change in thinking. In addition, the divided system separated special schools from regular schools and involved the separate training of the two types of teachers. So regular school personnel often appear to be intimidated by the terms and skills applied in special education. As a result, mainstream schools and teachers believe they do not have knowledge and skills in educating children with disabilities.

What is needed, therefore, is a programme of confrontation, publicity and other activities to encourage positive attitudes. Teachers have to be helped to see that children with disabilities are children and that they are no less important than their classmates. Learning is the growth of the whole human being and, therefore, children with disabilities can and should learn in school. In this way, schools and teachers can be empowered to educate all children. Also, publications, films and other mass media are being mobilised to present a positive image of people with disabilities. More specifically, the third Sunday of May has been made the national day for people with disabilities for the purpose of emphasising their needs. Various kinds of workshops and seminars, at national or local levels, are held to bring about awareness of the rights of people with disabilities based on the legislation and regulations.

For the large population in China the effort of providing education for all children is inevitably constrained by limitations in resources. In recent years the trend in education development is to decentralise the system. So resources for compulsory education are basically provided by local government. However, in order to support the development of special education a fund is set aside by the central government each year to set up schools or programmes for children with disabilities. As one of the implementation measures, in accordance with national policy, provincial governments also allocate additional finance for their local development. Additionally, a 15-25% higher salary, a special pension and honours are paid or awarded to recruit teachers for special education. Tuition fees are waived for all individuals with disabilities and special subsidies are paid to those in greatest need for their accommodation.

Although each fund is spent to tackle different issues, all the above support and some other fund raising efforts are aimed at assisting programme development and enabling children with disabilities to attend school. Although there are no statistics to show the effectiveness of these funding approaches, some local governments have begun to report a decrease in the leaving rate of teachers and the school dropout rate of children.

Of course, a great number of teachers are needed to initiate and carry out all these changes. It was estimated that for the 8 million children with disabilities to receive education, more than one million teachers are in need of training. In addition to improvements in salary, teachers have to have training that will make them confident in serving these children. For this purpose, their competence and performance, as well as skills and knowledge, need to be updated. The strategies that have been adopted for this problem are as follows:

- (1) Opening up a number of new teacher training institutions; to date there are now six universities and 33 teacher training colleges providing special education courses;
- (2) Recruiting teachers from regular education and providing them with intensive training for special education before job placement;
- (3) providing a special education curriculum in regular teacher training colleges;
- (4) running monthly or weekly workshops for teachers in special education in different school districts;
- (5) setting up various programmes for in-service training of teachers in regular schools to help them understand the significance of educating children with special needs.

CLASSROOM INTEGRATION PROJECT

As noted above, in 1987 54% of children with disabilities received their education in regular classes. In

order to maintain these children in classrooms, enrol more children and improve the quality of education provided, the Department of Basic Education of the State Education Commission sponsored a national project starting in 1989 to initiate a study of changes in school and classroom practice. This national study of classroom integration, led by the China National Institute for Educational Research, has expanded from eight provinces to 22 in the last five years. In other words, more than two thirds of Chinese provinces were involved in this action research initiative. The aim was to help children in 'attending school, remaining in school, and learning effectively'. In 1994 the conclusion of this project proved to be a successful one and led to the formulation of National Guidelines of Classroom Integration for Disabled Children.

In general the evidence from this study suggests that a massive implementation of the Classroom Integration Project is not only possible but appropriate. The project is now recognised as a force for promoting school effectiveness and support has been gained from various school districts. This success is a result of the following three groups of measures.

(1) Government intervention as the first priority to ensure that education is carried out in accordance with the law. Effective action includes:

- ◆ special education integrated into compulsory education and the relevant regulations adopted to support classroom integration;
- ◆ a general survey and registration of children with disabilities made to support planning of the project;
- ◆ regular school reforms that lay emphasis on the needs of children with disabilities;
- ◆ parental understanding, support and collaboration gained and mobilised;
- ◆ measures taken for training teachers, finding financial resources and solving the family difficulties of children with disabilities.

(2) Action taken to encourage classroom integration in regular primary schools, as follows:

- ◆ in implementation of classroom integration, schools employ qualified teachers and equip them with necessary knowledge and skills;
- ◆ school records and student files are considered as effective resources for educational management;
- ◆ from different aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation, teaching is well managed and promoted continuously.

(3) Special schools play a key role in the education reform, functioning as resource centres for change in respect to the following areas:

- ◆ in-service teacher training;
- ◆ parental guidance and counselling;
- ◆ assessment of children's difficulties and needs;
- ◆ a support service to regular classroom teaching procedures.

The Classroom Integration Project seems to have a number of benefits. First of all, it provides accessible education for the majority of children with special needs, because they live in the remote rural areas. Secondly, it has increased the school enrolment rate of children with disabilities in a desirable way and thus it is helpful for the universalisation of compulsory education. Thirdly, it helps children with disabilities adapt themselves to school life and society. Fourthly, it cultivates mutual understanding between students with disabilities and those without disabilities and develops relationships of love, care and support for each other for the sake of growth and learning. It is humanism in practice, encouraging children's perseverance in making unremitting efforts to improve themselves. Finally, it improves schools in a comprehensive way to meet the educational needs of all children so as to develop students' strength and qualities. Therefore, it seems to me that it is essential that we make the whole nation aware of the importance and usefulness of classroom integration.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

As we have seen, momentous changes have been accomplished in the field of special education as a result of the efforts summarised in this paper. Although there are no national statistics to show gains in the

school enrolment rate of children with disabilities, surveys in Jiangsu, Shandong and Heilongjiang provinces show that more than 90% of children with disabilities are now enrolled in schools. These increases in school enrolment rate prove that policy developments made in recent years have increased educational opportunities for children with special needs. Furthermore, the majority of these opportunities come from the implementation of integrated classes. About two thirds of children with disabilities in schools now receive their education in integrated classrooms.

China is a nation with a diversity of social issues. It is a vast territory and includes in its population 56 national minorities. Owing to geographical dissimilarities, economic and educational development differ from one region to another. Therefore, all these differences must be taken into account in planning educational development in order to meet the needs of all children.

In analyzing recent developments in making special education compulsory and inclusive for all children, several effective measures in our projects can be noted that may well be worthy of consideration by readers in other developing countries.

Government Intervention

The government plays an important role in the development of special education in China. The government has proved to be of significance in making legislation and regulations for national development. As a result the local administrations could be guided in accord with national themes. The decisive role of the government is highly effective in addressing major issues, organizing activities, training personnel and distributing resources. Leaving Some Leeway for Regional Autonomy Along with strong government intervention, a degree of decision making for planning to meet the needs of each specific region is given to the local administrations. In this sense, implementation of policy is more effective. Once local governments and people realise that they are responsible for the problems of people with disabilities, then they pool their strength to make changes possible.

Collaboration among Organizations

Since providing services for people with disabilities is a national theme it is not a problem for a particular department in isolation. Therefore, collaboration among different organisations is very important. Private organisations are invited to join the work of public administrations in order to provide more and better services. These collaborations are useful in pooling resources and sharing responsibility. It also gives concerned people an opportunity to speak up for the needs of people with disabilities. Additionally, assistance from international agencies, such as UNICEF and UNESCO, has made a considerable contribution to our work to meet the needs of all children.

Pilot Study for Massive Implementation

China is undertaking a massive social construction. We have found that the approach of implementing a radical change, in most cases, can only be made possible through pilot experiments. In our project of educational integration, for example, we started in three provinces after the collection of data which proved to be applicable to school changes. Therefore, this experiment could be expanded at a later date to more regions, step by step. At the same time, local needs are taken into account seriously so that an implementation plan can be made by grassroots units at township or county level.

Network of Special Education Services

Unlike the radical reforms in some developed countries, that have turned over special education services to regular schools, state schools in China provide three levels of services: special schools, special classes and integrated classes. These services interlink with each other and help build teamwork to solve problems and provide a range of services to children with disabilities. There are also various alternatives, such as support teachers, rehabilitation or assessment services, which also become supportive systems to the main body of the network.

School Reform

In the work of meeting the needs of all children during the past several years, Chinese teachers and other concerned personnel have realised one fact. That is to say, quality of education cannot be improved without

changes in educational philosophy and school practice. Put simply, schools and classrooms must be changed if they are to create the conditions within which all children can participate, contribute and experience success.

Teacher Training

In educational circles there is a Chinese saying that national development mainly depends on education and that fulfilment of education rests on teachers' aspirations and qualities. Therefore, teacher education has been recognised as the doorkeeper to offering better services to children with disabilities in educational development.

CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of the status of disabilities in China, this paper has presented a summary of the essential features of recent developments in providing education for children with special needs. Issues and causes which impede the fulfilment of the educational right of children with disabilities were identified. Certain ways and approaches that have been applied have been effective in dealing with the encountered problems. Of course, China still has a long way to go before she could make a declaration that the goal of 'Education for All' has been achieved. As long as we can keep moving forward and keep in pace with world development, we are confident that we will eventually provide quality education for every child. We also hope that our experience is useful for colleagues in other countries looking to provide better services for all children, especially for those who share similar problems.

58 Y. Chen

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