

Special Education in China

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Abstract

Despite the fact that China has a deep-rooted history of sympathetic attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, Special Education in China today is much like it was in the United States prior to the implementation of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. There is little of the uniformity that is evident in special education programs across the United States. This paper describes the history, important laws, system, challenges, and future of special education in China.

A snapshot of special education in China is quite similar to what the United States looked like, with regard to special education, prior to implementing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL. 94-142) in 1975. The only thing consistent about their system is the *lack* of consistency, from school to school, city to city, and province to province. This paper describes the history, important laws, system, challenges, and future of special education in China.

History

People knowledgeable about special education in China refer to the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 as the start of special education services in that country. At that time, schools for the blind and deaf were founded (Worrell & Taber, 2009). However, it was not until 1980 that teacher training for special educators began, and until the 1990s when teacher training institutions were required to offer special education courses. Prior to this time, special schools focused on two disability categories, hearing and visual impairments, and these special schools were the only places where students with disabilities could receive school services. Furthermore, children with mental retardation and children with physical disabilities were largely excluded from school due to lack of personnel and resources, and children with other types of disabilities (i.e., learning disability, autism) were not even recognized as having a disability (Deng & Harris, 2008).

Despite this late start in special education compared to many western nations, China does have a history with regard to the acknowledgement of people with disabilities. There is a sympathetic attitude toward people with disabilities that is deeply rooted in Chinese society (Deng & Harris, 2008). Prior to 1949, private education was available to those few that could afford it, and Christian missionaries often served those with hearing and visual impairments (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007).

Still, there are forces in Chinese society and culture that run counter to prospects of providing an appropriate education for people with disabilities. Confucian philosophy values an established social order, and people with disabilities have been at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of Chinese society (Deng & Harris, 2008). Furthermore, Confucius valued education for scholars but not the populous at large. The situation did not improve for people with disabilities during Mao's time, as the purpose of schooling in China was to produce laborers educated in socialism. Students with disabilities were allowed in school but given no special services (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). By 1987, only 55% of students with disabilities were in school compared to an overall Chinese enrollment rate of 97% (McCabe, 2003).

Important Laws

There were some important laws that have influenced the evolution of special education in China. In 1982, the newly revised constitution of China stated the country's responsibility for educating people with disabilities, the first legal mandate for the provision of special education in China. However, the firm foundation did not come until the National People's Congress adopted the 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (Worrell & Taber, 2009), mandating that *all* children are entitled to 9 years of free public education—6 years of elementary education and three years of secondary school education. Special schools were organized for children with visual, hearing and mental impairments. In 1990, the Law on the Protection of the Disabled Persons (1990) emphasized that families, work units and community

organizations must share the responsibility for caring for individuals with disabilities. In 1994, this law was strengthened by the *Ordinance of Educations for Persons with Disabilities* which required a qualification certificate system for the special education teacher (Deng & Harris, 2008). Furthermore, the Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China (1993), and the Education Law of the People's Republic of China (1995) both call for offering educational undertakings for individuals with disabilities.

Today

As a result of the previously mentioned laws, and the obvious western influence over time, the face of special education is much different today. China is attempting to do much more in the way of educating children with disabilities. China now recognizes six classes of disability: visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric and multiple impairments. While the prevalence of people with disabilities appears to be lower in China than other countries, this difference might be due to the fact that China still does not recognize all of the categories of disability that other countries do. For example, the predominant category of disability in the United States is Specific Learning Disability (43% of all disabilities), a category not even recognized in China (Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, 2009). In addition, China is an agriculturally based culture and the majority of people live in rural areas. Physical labor is the primary work in these rural areas where people can function productively even if they cannot read or write. Therefore, many people with disabilities (e.g. autism, learning disabilities, and mental retardation) may not even attend school in rural and remote areas (Worrell & Taber, 2009).

Learning in Regular Classroom

Because most of China's population lives in rural areas, the cost of funding special schools for most children with disabilities in these areas is quite prohibitive. Influenced by inclusion in western countries, the "Learning in the Regular Classroom" (LRC) movement gained popularity in the early 1990s (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). The use of this setting to serve students with disabilities has grown astronomically. In 1990, there were 105,000 students with disabilities in school and about 18% of them were placed in general education classrooms. By 2003, LRC programs served approximately 67% of all students identified with disabilities in general education classrooms of public schools (Deng & Harris, 2008).

Children with disabilities are now welcome in Chinese general education classrooms; however, services provided are at best inconsistent. Eligibility for the LRC placements consists of those students who can adapt to studies and life in public schools. At present, three categories of disability are being served in the regular education setting: visually impaired, hearing impaired, and mental retardation. The most notable achievement made by China's LRC programs is the significant increase in numbers of enrolled children with disabilities included in general education classrooms (Deng & Harris, 2008).

Still, China has several major hurdles to overcome. First is the reality of large class sizes. Typically classes have between 40 and 75 students thus making it extremely difficult to individualize instruction for those students who need it. Special schools, on the other hand, typically have about 10 students. Additionally, teacher training is problematical as well. Many teachers in ordinary schools have never had training in special education (Worrell & Taber,

2009). Students with disabilities are often ignored in the classroom and may not receive appropriate instruction, because the teachers have neither enough time nor adequate knowledge to help them (Deng & Harris, 2008; Pang & Richey, 2006).

Despite the similar appearance of the Chinese “Learning in the Regular Classroom” movement, and the United States’ trend toward inclusion, there are many differences. The United States’ policy is based on the philosophy of equality of opportunity and diversity from a liberal political system and a pluralistic culture, whereas China had a long tradition of a hierarchal pyramid of social relationships. Equality and decentralization are not a priority in China. The primary goal of China is to give most children with disabilities the opportunity to go to school (i.e., the right to be educated). The primary goal of inclusion in the United States is to give children the right to be equally educated. China does not require a free and appropriate education. Children with severe and multiple disabilities and many children with moderate disabilities are still excluded from public schools. In 2003, there were about 323,000 school-aged children with disabilities that were excluded from public schools (Guozhong, 2006). China’s system is simpler and less systematic. The Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, and parental involvement are not strongly emphasized in LRC. Furthermore, China emphasizes a remedial model more than an educational needs model, and it stresses identification and remediation of deficits rather than capitalizing on student’s strengths (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001). Finally, this “Learning in the Regular Classroom” movement does not necessarily reflect allegiance to the concept of inclusion, rather it more accurately reflects a shortage of personnel, limited fiscal resources and facilities, in addition to geographical considerations (Deng & Manset, 2000).

Today’s Challenges

Several challenges face Chinese special education early in this 21st century. For one, the whole-class teaching model has long been dominant in the Chinese classrooms. This model was effective in teaching the information found in the textbooks to students in the prevailing, overcrowded big size classrooms. This type of instruction was believed to better prepare students in the stiff competition for grade promotion and limited college entrances, however the challenge remains for ways in which to address learning diversity under this teaching uniformity and to practice individualized teaching for those students with disabilities (Deng & Harris, 2008). There is a lack of instructional quality and accountability with regard to students with exceptional needs.

The achievement of students with disabilities has not been required to be included in official program evaluations, and no specific evaluation procedures have been developed. In some “Learning in the Regular Classroom” schools, students with disabilities have been observed sitting alone, isolated from classroom activities, or have even remained at home, despite the fact that their names are on the registration list. This unfortunately common practice has been called “drifting in the regular classroom” (Deng & Manset, 2000, p. 3).

There are problems with the procedures used to identify and diagnose children with disabilities. There is a lack of diagnostic technology and experienced professionals. Many of the instruments used are inaccurate translations of commonly given Western instruments such as the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale IV, or the Draw a Person Test, which are usually administered to determine whether a child has mental retardation; no attention is paid to adaptive

behavior (Worrell & Taber, 2009; Deng & Manset, 2000). In fact, there is a shortage of school psychologists in China who are trained specifically to give these instruments (Worrell & Taber, 2009).

Another problem concerns vocational education for students with disabilities. While vocational education is an emphasis in Chinese special schools, traditionally it is limited in scope: painting for students with hearing impairment, massage and weaving for students with visual impairments, and sewing for those with mental retardation. Besides representing limited opportunity, these skills are not necessarily appropriate for those living in rural area (Deng & Manset, 2000).

China does attempt to provide services that somewhat resembles the United States' concept of educating students in their least restrictive environment. China offers a continuum of services from separate schools, special classes attached to regular schools, to the Learning in Regular Classrooms policy (Worrell & Taber, 2009). However, resources, trained teachers, and special schools are extremely limited. For example, for Beijing's population of 17 million people, there is only one special school for children with mental retardation and autism in each of Beijing's seven districts (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007).

Teachers are especially challenged in China's system. In the United States, special education teachers are more likely to be trained through university diploma/degree programs or continued education system in a more systematic and carefully designed way than in China (Deng & Harris, 2008). Furthermore, the task of implementing special education services in China is daunting. Even in the United States, with class sizes about half that of typical Chinese classes and with a paraprofessional or a second teacher assisting in inclusive classrooms, the smooth and full implementation of inclusion is still a challenge. Teachers seemed to have a much heavier instructional and management workload than their counterparts in the United States because paraprofessionals or teacher assistants are not employed thus further challenging the implementation of individualized instruction (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). Additionally, because of the highly competitive system of promotion by examination, educators in China are often faced with the push for higher promotion rates into colleges, while simultaneously addressing the needs of their students with disabilities. Within this competitive environment, teachers may not have enough time, energy, or professional knowledge to help students with special needs in their classrooms (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001).

Another challenging factor concerns transportation. In addition to the financial constraints, transportation has been an influential factor. Inconvenient transportation has meant that it is much more feasible for a child with a disability to attend a local general education school than to attend a centrally located special school even if placement at the special school would be more appropriate (McCabe, 2003).

Teacher training for special education in China is quite mixed. Even when training exists, it is noted that an understanding of theory is more highly valued than student teaching competence, and that special education student teaching experience often lasts only about four weeks (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). There is a push to train teachers in more flexible methods, and in addition to the traditional whole-class lecture model of instruction, a model that combines whole-class teaching, tutoring outside of class, and cooperative learning has been widely applied and is strongly recommended to all teachers participating in "Learning in Regular Classroom"

programs (Deng & Manset, 2000). That said, any training is better than what most Chinese teachers receive regarding special education. In 1991, it was estimated that even if the existing teacher-training institutes could double their graduation rate, it would take more than 1,000 years to educate enough teachers to meet the needs of just the students with mental retardation (Deng & Manset, 2000).

Finally, parental advocacy is on the rise in China. In the United States, the advocacy efforts of parents (including litigation) were a main factor in bringing about a system of free and appropriate public education, including education in inclusive settings, for children with disabilities. Today in China, parents are beginning to address the same issues that parents in the United States addressed more than 25 years ago—the right to an education for their children of different abilities (McCabe, 2003).

The Future

With all of the challenges listed, the future is still brighter for children with exceptional needs in China. Children with disabilities are becoming more and more welcome in general education settings. Programs to prepare special education teachers are developing rapidly (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). With increased parental advocacy and improved teacher preparation, no longer will exclusion of children with disabilities predominate in China.

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