Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

Exploring the Transformation of Education for Children with Disabilities in China: Implementation and Challenges of Inclusive Education Policies

Sijin Chen[1,a,*]

[1]*Institute of Education, University College London, Gower Street, London, United Kingdom*
a. stnzsc2@ucl.ac.uk
**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper examines China's significant shift in the education of disabled children from segregated special education to the inclusive "Learning in Regular Classroom" (LRC) model, in alignment with international trends. The elitist structure in the educational system, geographic concerns, and teacher resources are the three main obstacles both inside and outside of China's educational system that are the subject of this paper. The paper analyses the theoretical and practical challenges encountered in implementing inclusive education (IE). Additionally, it analyzes the factors contributing to the inability of Chinese society to accept children with disabilities.The paper evaluates the effectiveness and reasonableness of the Chinese government's approaches to resolving these issues and emphasizes that, in reality, it is doubtful if children with disabilities are actually granted their full right to an education. The paper suggests that the Chinese government could consider using technology to promote IE and try to change people's prejudices against children with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability children, Inclusive Education, LRC, Marginalized group, China.

1. Introduction

China's approach to teaching disabled students has changed dramatically in recent decades, moving away from conventional segregated special education and toward a more inclusive curriculum. International support for inclusive education is evident in the initiatives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which have catalyzed significant structural reforms in the educational framework for children with disabilities in China. To guarantee that all students have equal access to educational opportunities, IE is defined in this sense as the removal of all obstacles both inside and outside the educational system [1]. The concept of barriers, as mentioned in the definition, is the central issue to be examined in this paper. This paper will explore, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, the various challenges faced by children with disabilities on the path to IE in China, and how the Chinese government, as the authoritative body, has practically addressed these challenges. Finally, the paper will emphasize that, despite the government's proactive efforts to provide solutions, these issues may not be fully resolved in practice. Whether children with disabilities have genuinely received their deserved educational rights remains a critical question to be discussed.

© 2025 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

2. Literature Review

2.1. Development History

IE was introduced in China in the mid-1980s. The education of children with disabilities has changed in tandem with the nation's reform and opening, particularly around special education [2]. Although at the time most children with disabilities were still sent to special schools, a national survey in 1987 found that many school-age children with disabilities were unable to attend these schools. There were not enough special schools to meet the needs of all children with disabilities [3]. However, the government's long-term dedication to the rights of children with special needs was shown in 1982 with the enactment of the Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons [4]. The National People's Congress then approved legislation in 1986 mandating that children with intellectual, visual, and hearing problems receive compulsory schooling [5]. These legal measures reflect the government's concern for and protection of the education of children with disabilities.

2.2. Government Practices

The LRC paradigm was developed in China and considers both the requirements of Chinese students with disabilities and trends in global development. Additionally, LRC is now the primary placement choice for kids with special education needs [6]. The Chinese Ministry of Education emphasizes that different educational methods should be adopted according to the different types of disabilities and academic abilities of children with disabilities, and IE should be actively promoted across the country. The 2021 modifications to the People's Republic of China's Education Law and the Law for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities go into depth about this [7]. Despite the Chinese government's official initiatives to support IE, how these policies are implemented is a question that needs to be explored in this paper.

2.3. Difficulties Encountered in Implementation

First, according to UNESCO's definition of IE, students with disabilities have equal access to education, including the opportunity to attend local mainstream schools and learn alongside their classmates without impairments [8]. This is also the basis of the LRC model developed by the Chinese government based on the principles of IE set out in the Salamanca Statement. IE is therefore rooted in educational and ethical principles, which means that it protects children with disabilities from physical and cultural discrimination and marginalization [9].

However, policy implementation has not been as ideal as the policy suggests. Promoting IE faces challenges related to sociocultural contexts, geographical differences, and limited teacher resources. Qu found in traditional Confucian classics that historically, the human body was considered the foundation of personality, and an imperfect body meant moral and social failure [10]. As one of the core components of Chinese cultural thought, Confucianism still profoundly influences Chinese society today [10]. In Confucianism, the marginalization of people with disabilities was not only a moral issue, but also extended to the political realm. For example, people with disabilities were not allowed to take the traditional imperial examinations, which were used to select candidates for the bureaucracy [10]. Therefore, as an integral part of Chinese culture, Confucianism to some extent explains why IE was not supported in the past. Moreover, Confucianism upholds a strict hierarchical social order, which is reflected in the belief that education should produce elites to govern the country [11]. In such a hierarchical society, people with disabilities are implicitly classified as belonging to the lowest class, which indirectly explains how the elite system is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese educational structure.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

As a result, even though China has spent the last 20 years defending the rights of those with disabilities, a culture of disability inclusion has not yet been completely developed. Rural communities are much less inclined to think that children with disabilities should obtain an education in the absence of such an inclusive culture. Based on the data in Table 1, the key issue of uneven educational resources due to regional differences will also be discussed in subsequent paper. There aren't many special education schools in rural regions, according to a 2018 Ministry of Education report that compared special education schools in urban and rural locations. Furthermore, the top-down strategy for dividing up special education funding between rural and urban areas hasn't worked. [12] (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Special Education Resources in Urban and Rural areas

	Books and Magazines in Libraries (Volume)	Classroom (Room)	Network Multimedia Classroom	Total Value of Equip & Instrument
Urban area	12640509	44395	24100	473496.47
Rural area	649008	2410	1323	22711.47

Third, a lack of sufficient inclusive teacher resources exists in Chinese culture because of teachers' incomplete understanding or acceptance of the notion of IE, according to several research conducted under the influence of Confucianism [13, 14]. Therefore, the shortage of qualified inclusive educators and the challenges in teacher training will be another significant barrier for the Chinese government in realizing IE. The cultural barriers posed by Confucian thought, the elitist system, regional disparities, and limited teacher resources are all substantial obstacles to achieving IE.

This paper will further explore these issues and attempt to propose solutions in subsequent sections.

3. Three Major Challenges on the Path to Achieving Inclusive Education in China

3.1. The First Challenge to Achieving Inclusive Education

First, this paper makes the case that the elitist system in Chinese education has been reinforced by the Confucian notion in traditional Chinese culture, making it challenging for children with disabilities to adjust to and integrate into the LRC model. The enormous pressure on students to perform well on exams to be considered for admission to elite colleges is one of the most difficult problems with China's educational reform, according to OECD study [15]. However, this has severely hindered the development of students' individuality. The intense exam competition used to select elite students is precisely what this essay refers to as the elitist system [2]. Thus, in such an elitist system, ability is the key determinant for acceptance. If students with disabilities cannot perform at the same academic level as their non-disabled peers, they cannot be fully integrated into the LRC model.

When the needs of children with disabilities cannot be met in the LRC classrooms, they are likely to be excluded by both peers and teachers in mainstream schools. As discussed in a report by Deng & Zhu, a 2012 incident at Baocheng Primary School in Shenzhen involved a parent petition signed by 19 individuals demanding the expulsion of a student with autism [16]. This case is not isolated, as similar events have occurred in Beijing and other provinces. The root cause of these incidents is that students with disabilities often lack adequate support in the LRC setting [16]. Furthermore, most Chinese teachers use biased teaching methods, which contribute to the lack of academic assistance for students with disabilities in LRC classes. In many situations, the concept of inclusiveness is

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

misconstrued and reduced to letting kids with disabilities sit quietly in class without disturbing the peace [17]. This paper reaffirms that the obsession with selecting elites is one of the primary obstacles to achieving IE in China. Furthermore, Chinese educators are unable to appropriately accommodate pupils with impairments in the classroom due to their limited comprehension of IE. This demonstrates the necessity for the Chinese government to focus more on the detrimental effects that social culture may have on disabled children.

3.2. The Second Challenge to Achieving Inclusive Education

Second, this paper discovers that China's imbalanced resource allocation between urban and rural regions marginalizes and stigmatizes children with special needs, impeding the development of IE. The huge differences in economic and educational resources between urban and rural areas have created a clear hierarchical division between developed urban areas and impoverished rural areas, which has led to an unbalanced implementation of education policies. As a result, the opportunities for children with disabilities to receive IE vary greatly [18]. For example, although the policy stipulates that children with special educational needs can go to school, it does not mandate it, which results in these children often not receiving effective educational support [6]. Kritzer argues that since these children are unlikely to become part of the national elite, there is no need to ensure that they receive a high-quality education [19]. This paper rejects this view and believes that it reflects feudal and outdated thinking in society. The fact that rural areas place less value on the education of disabled children and that provincial capital cities receive preferential allocation of educational resources, leaving rural areas with only limited residual resources, further exacerbates the disparity in the education of disabled children between urban and rural areas.

The geographical problems in rural areas themselves are exacerbated by the uneven distribution of educational resources, and the plan envisaged by the Chinese government has not yet received strong support [20]. Therefore, because rural areas lack the special educational resources needed by children with disabilities, some children with disabilities are forced to attend the few mainstream schools in the area. In the research conducted by Li and Hall, it was similarly found that the infrastructure in mainstream rural schools is inadequate, creating significant barriers for students with severe disabilities [18]. This further demonstrates that the national government’s goal of achieving IE has not been realized in rural areas. Rural children with impairments have not gotten enough attention in Chinese society. This paper argues that local government organizations have exacerbated the marginalization of children with disabilities in rural regions by allocating funding to students with more developmental potential to ensure economic success [21]. Additionally, Zablocki and Krezmien assert that family circumstances have a significant role in the absence of school attendance for children with impairments, and that the socioeconomic standing of parents is a very significant effect [22]. In the context of traditional Chinese cultural values, rural areas often adhere to the most conventional beliefs. Most rural communities view disability as a source of shame and stigma for the family, which results in many children with disabilities being deprived of an education [23]. This paper infers that, in rural areas, the rights of children with disabilities are not protected, and they are unable to gain even the most basic respect, leading to severe stigmatization. Achieving IE in China, therefore, will be a significant challenge.

3.3. The Third Challenge to Achieving Inclusive Education

Third, the paper claims that one of the biggest obstacles to IE's adoption in China is the lack of inclusive instructors. According to research, it's critical for a typical teacher to be able to modify the curriculum to meet the academic demands of the class's disabled pupils [24, 25]. In addition, the willingness of regular teachers to become teachers in an inclusive system and their ability to teach

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

are also factors to consider. According to Sun's survey, teachers in China who are capable of teaching children with disabilities are not typically full-time staff and often hold multiple roles [26]. Even more concerning is the fact that many Chinese instructors lack training in IE or special education, making it difficult for them to use resource rooms to help children with impairments. [17].

This paper argues that without standardized training and firm financial support for IE from the Chinese government, achieving true IE will be impossible. Here, financial support specifically refers to adequate compensation for inclusive teachers. Xu & Malinen's study similarly suggests that increasing the salaries of inclusive teachers is one way to encourage their participation [21]. Campbell and Uren's research indicates that China's teacher education system is hierarchical, with the rank of the teaching department determining the teacher's pay [27]. Special education, especially IE, is positioned at the lowest tier, and so are the corresponding salary levels. This shows that if the Chinese government can invest more in financial support for IE talent, the situation may be different. These teachers still face marginalization in the educational system, despite the Chinese government's 1994 Provisional Measures for the Regular Class Placement of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities, which suggested that other teachers be encouraged to engage in inclusive education and that inclusive teachers receive financial incentives [21]. The Chinese government ought to take this matter seriously. Young educators' inclination to choose this career path in the future will be influenced, in part, by the social standing and treatment of inclusive instructors in China. If the Chinese government aims to cultivate more capable teachers to support IE, it must pay greater attention to the welfare and well-being of these inclusive teachers.

4. Discussion

It is indisputable that IE benefits not just students with disabilities on an individual basis but also has enormous positive effects on non-disabled students and social harmony, even though China faces many obstacles in its pursuit of inclusive. IE can promote amicable interactions between students with and without disabilities, lowering prejudice and fear, according to research by Jardinez and Natividad [28]. More importantly, social interactions can foster teamwork and cooperation between these two groups of students, thereby creating a social environment where everyone feels included and respected [29].

This paper maintains that, placing kids with impairments in regular classes is not the only aspect of IE. Teachers must instead make conscious efforts and adaptations to fully integrate the educational needs of students with disabilities into classroom learning. Considering the deep-rooted influence of Confucianism in Chinese culture, which indirectly shapes Chinese teachers' perspectives on IE, this essay argues that cultural reform is one of the necessary tasks for China. Zhang and Rosen propose a reform strategy that involves applying traditional cultural concepts innovatively in contemporary Chinese society while discarding outdated and negative aspects of the ideology [30]. How to reinterpret the concepts of "benevolence," "love," and "respect" and how to truly support marginalized groups in society are critical issues the Chinese government must address to realize IE in the future.

This paper contends that, the Confucian philosophy is not perfect and its relevance to China's future globalization trends and orientations must be continuously considered. Therefore, in addition to helping teachers dispel misconceptions about IE, the Chinese government must assemble a group of certified and experienced inclusive educators. The Chinese government can start with effective inclusive teacher training programs, such as incorporating special education courses into all university professional training programs to provide an option for future young educators [31]. Effective teacher training is one of the key factors that can help China achieve true IE.

Second, as the internet continues to advance, social media has emerged as a means of everyday communication, and its use in China has been rising gradually. Zhuang et al. suggests that one of the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

potential strategies China aims to adopt to promote IE in recent years is through virtual environments [32]. By transforming the WeChat public platform into a channel for raising awareness about inclusive and special education, the government can further enhance public understanding of these concepts. China created the popular mobile real-time text and voice chatting app WeChat, which is utilized all around the nation [33]. This paper argues that leveraging commonly used social media software to disseminate information on IE is indeed a highly effective approach. However, this method is not suitable for people in impoverished rural areas. In these regions, internet infrastructure is underdeveloped, and some residents may even be illiterate or lack access to electronic devices, making it difficult for them to engage with IE through social media. Thus, this paper suggests that the Chinese government needs to develop different strategies tailored to the needs of different populations to effectively promote IE.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that achieving IE in China faces significant challenges and requires long-term efforts, resources and policy support to overcome three major problems. First, children with impairments are marginalized because elitism is ingrained in conventional Chinese education. Second, children with disabilities are excluded and subjected to prejudice in rural regions due to the disparity in resources between urban and rural areas. Third, although teachers play a key role in IE, China is severely lacking teachers with IE skills. These problems are difficult to solve in the short term, and the approach proposed in this paper to promote IE through social media may not be applicable to all groups. Despite the numerous challenges, China must keep promoting IE in the future. This paper argues that in the early stages, emphasis should be placed on addressing the issues of an elitist education system, unequal resource allocation, and a lack of teachers, to establish a strong foundation for the widespread implementation of inclusive education.

References

[1] *UNESCO. (2021). Inclusion in education. Unesco.org; mondoin-mobile-ui. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378427*

[2] *Deng, M., & Poon-McBrayer, K. F. (2012). Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China. British Journal of Special Education, 39(3), 117–122.*

[3] *Deng, M., & Poon-McBrayer, K. F. (2004). Inclusive Education in China: Conceptualisation and Realisation. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 24(2), 143–156.*

[4] *Alduais, A., Deng, M., & Alfadda, H. (2023). Perceptions of Stakeholders Regarding China's Special Education and Inclusive Education Legislation, Law, and Policy: Implications for Student Wellbeing and Mental Health2023. Behavioral Sciences, 13(515), 1–25.*

[5] *Deng, M., & Harris, K. (2008). Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in General Education Classrooms in China. Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children, 31(3), 195–207.*

[6] *Ministry of Education. (2009). Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China - Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. En.moe.gov.cn. http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/laws_policies/201506/t20150626_191391.html.*

[7] *Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China. (2020). Reply to Proposal No. 6045 of the Third Session of the 13th National People's Congress - Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China Government Portal Website. Moe.gov.cn. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/xxgk_jyta/jyta_jijiaosi/202009/t20200921_489315.html*

[8] *Deng, M., & Guo, L. (2007). Local special education administrators' understanding of inclusive education in China. International Journal of Educational Development, 27(6), 697–707.*

[9] *Booth, T., Ed, & Ainscow, M., Ed. (1998). From Them to Us: An International Study of Inclusion in Education. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 7625 Empire Dr., Florence, KY 41042 (paperback: ISBN-0-415-13979-1, $29.95; hardback: ISBN-0-415-18739-7, $95). Tel: 800-634-7064 (Toll Free).*

[10] *Qu, Y. (2020). Understanding the body and disability in Chinese contexts. Disability & Society, 35(5), 738–759.*

[11] *Qu, X. (2024). Confucianism and human rights - exploring the philosophical base for inclusive education or children with disabilities in China. Disability & Society, 39(6), 1443–1464.*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.18049

[12] *Ministry of Education. (2018). Condition of Fixed Assets and Teaching Resources in Special Education Schools - Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Moe.gov.cn.http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/statistics/2022/national/202401/t20240110_1099465.html*

[13] *Sharma, U., & Das, A. (2013). Inclusive education in India: past, present and future. Support for Learning, 30(1), 55–68.*

[14] *Sharma, U., Moore, D., & Sonawane, S. (2009). Attitudes and concerns of pre-service teachers regarding inclusion of students with disabilities into regular schools in Pune, India. Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 37(3), 319–331.*

[15] *OECD. (2011). Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education Lessons from PISA for the United States (pp. 1–260).*

[16] *Chinanews. (2012). Parents of a child with autism in Shenzhen jointly expelled their child from school, and various parties are now trying to help the child resume his studies.Chinanews.com.cn. https://www.chinanews.com.cn/edu/2012/09-28/4219796.shtml*

[17] *Jia, L., Tan, R., & Santi, M. (2024). Teachers' understanding of inclusive education: comparing perspectives in China and Italy. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 44(2), 503–515.*

[18] *Li, M., & Hall, J. (2018). Inclusive education in rural China: teachers' attitudes matter. SSRN Electronic Article.*

[19] *Kritzer, J. (2014). A Four Country Comparison: Special Education in the United States, China, India and Thailand. British Journal of Applied Science & Technology, 4(23), 3370–3382.*

[20] *Xu, X., & Malinen, O.-P. (2015). Teacher Views of Support for Inclusive Education in Beijing, China. International Journal of Special Education, 30(3), 150–159. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1094968*

[21] *Romstein, K. (2015). Neoliberal Values and Disability: Critical Approach to Inclusive Education. In ERIC. Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.*

[22] *Zablocki, M., & Krezmien, M. P. (2012). Drop-Out Predictors Among Students With High-Incidence Disabilities. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 24(1), 53–64.*

[23] *Chiang, L. H., & Hadadian, A. (2010). Raising Children with Disabilities in China: The Need for Early Interventions. International Journal of Special Education, 25(2), 113–118.*

[24] *Salend, S. J. (2011). Creating Inclusive Classrooms. Prentice Hall.*

[25] *Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (2000). Restructuring for caring and effective education: piecing the puzzle together. Brookes.*

[26] *Sun, Y. (2013). Current situation and development strategies for the construction of resource classrooms in Beijing. Irtree.com. http://buu.irtree.com/articles/article_detail.aspx?id=5868a5e668474b38a1a6808b5ac52b77*

[27] *Campbell, A., & Uren, M. (2011). "The Invisibles"...Disability in China in the 21st Century. International Journal of Special Education, 26(1), 12–24. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ921178*

[28] *Jardinez, M. J., & Natividad, L. R. (2024). The The Advantages and Challenges of Inclusive Education: Striving for Equity in the Classroom. Shanlax International Journal of Education (Online), 12(2), 57–65.*

[29] *Roldán, S. M., Marauri, J., Aubert, A., & Flecha, R. (2021). How inclusive interactive learning environments benefit students without special needs. Frontiers in Psychology, 12(1).*

[30] *Zhang, Y., & Rosen, S. (2018). Confucian philosophy and contemporary Chinese societal attitudes toward people with disabilities and inclusive education. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 50(12), 1113–1123.*

[31] *Wanbin, S., Horadal, P., Teekasap, S., & Ling, G. (2023). Quality Improvement in Inclusive Education for Support Systems and Attitudes - Evidence form the Sichuan Province of China. International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 22(11), 212–242.*

[32] *HAUWADHANASUK, T., KARNAS, M., & ZHUANG, M. (2018). INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PLANS AND PRACTICES IN CHINA, THAILAND, AND TURKEY. Educational Planning, 25(1), 29–48.*

[33] *Lien, C. H., & Cao, Y. (2014). Examining WeChat users' motivations, trust, attitudes, and positive word-of-mouth: Evidence from China. Computers in Human Behavior, 41, 104–111.*