

Education of Students with Visual Impairments in China: An Overview

Jing Qi¹, Yan Li¹, & Wenhong Xu¹

¹ College of Physical Education and Health Sciences, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Correspondence: Wenhong Xu, College of Physical Education and Health Sciences, Zhejiang Normal University, 688 Yingbin Road, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, 321004, China. E-mail: xuwenhong@zjnu.edu.cn

Received: December 15, 2023

Accepted: January 17, 2024

Online Published: January 31, 2024

doi:10.5539/ass.v20n1p15

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v20n1p15>

Abstract

Chinese children and adolescents with visual impairments (VI) receive their education in three education placements: learning in regular classrooms (LRC), special schools, and “teacher-delivered home/communities/child welfare-based instruction” (*song jiao shang men*). The purposes of this paper are to introduce, summarize, and analyze the policies, implementations, and measures to educate children and adolescents with VI and discuss and conclude the lessons and enlightenment of the experiences to the education for school-age youth with VI in China.

Keywords: education, students with visual impairments, China, overview

1. Introduction

Chinese children and adolescents with visual impairments (VI) receive their education in three education placements: learning in regular classrooms (LRC), special schools, and “teacher-delivered home/communities/child welfare-based instruction” (*song jiao shang men*) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Education of PRC, 2017). The LRC model represents a localized inclusive education initiative to enroll children with disabilities into regular education schools since the late 1980s (Deng & Harris, 2008; Xiao, 2007). Chinese special schools primarily comprise schools for children with visual impairments (VI) and hearing impairments, as well as schools for students with developmental disabilities. By 2020, China has 2,244 special schools, which served 320,775 students with disabilities (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2020). This paper aims to introduce, summarize, and analyze the policies, implementations, and measures to educate children and adolescents with VI and discuss and conclude the lessons and enlightenment of the experiences to the education for school-age youth with VI in China.

2. Chinese Laws and Policies for Educating Students with Disabilities

China adopts a school education system, which comprises infant school education, primary education, middle education, and higher education (The Third Session of the Eighth National People's Congress, 1995). To fulfill the educational needs of school-aged children and adolescents with disabilities, the Chinese government has introduced a series of laws and statutes that govern special education since the PRC was founded in 1949.

The government of China incorporated the special education for school-aged students with disabilities into the national education system in 1951 (State Council of the PRC, 1951). The Constitution of the People's Republic of China has been revised in 1982 and proposed that “the country and society should help individuals with VI, hearing impairments, and other disabilities to work, live, and be educated” (Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress, 1982), ensuring that the individuals with disabilities have the lawful rights to be educated. In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law was adopted at the Sixth National People's Congress and stipulated that all children who have reached the age of six should enroll in school and receive the nine-year compulsory education (i.e., primary school education and junior middle school education), regardless of sex, nationality, or race, including those with disabilities (Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress, 1984). Making the 9-year compulsory education basically universal for school-aged children with disabilities was the core work of special education in the eighth decade of last century in China.

The Regulation for the Individuals with Disabilities of the PRC was issued and implemented on August 23, 1994. This is China's first special legal provision for the education of the individuals with disabilities. It makes explicit stipulations for preschool education, compulsory education, vocational education, ordinary education, higher education, medium education, adult education, teachers, material insurance, and an incentive system. The

regulation had its latest amendment in 2017 (State Council of the PRC, 2017). Thus, the Chinese Ministry of Education has established numerous policies and regulations to address the quality of education for students with disabilities. For example, the Plan for Upgrading the Level of Special Education (2014-2016) and 2nd Plan for Upgrading the Level of Special Education proposed various strategies to increase the relevance and effectiveness of individualized education in public schools in China (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2014; 2017). Recently, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council of issued a blueprint called “China's Education Modernization 2035” for the country's education development in the coming decade (State Council of the PRC, 2019). This blueprint emphasized that education should be covered and improved for all school-age children and adolescents, wherein the education system better serves the whole society.

3. Compulsory Education Stage for Students with VI

Children and adolescents with VI receive their compulsory education in China through three ways, such as attending in special schools, attending in regular school through attached special classes and studying in regular classes, and teacher-delivered home/communities/child welfare-based instruction. By 2020, 42,161 children and adolescents with VI are receiving compulsory education (Table 1) (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2020).

Table 1. Information of Chinese students with visual impairments in the formal education system by different types and levels in 2020

School Type	Students in primary schools (n)	Students in junior middle schools (n)	Students in high schools (n)	Total (n)
Special schools	5,711	2,686	1,011	9,408
Attending in regular classes	20254	12499	0	32,753
	Total			42,161

Most children and adolescents with mild VI chose LRC to receive their education during the compulsory education stage. LRC aims to offer children with VI the same opportunities for mandated education as their peers without disabilities in regular neighborhood schools. Therefore, students with mild VI are studying under the same curriculum, teaching objectives and requirements, and content of teaching materials. A total of 16 special classes for students with severe VI and blindness exists in regular schools in 2020. LRC is also one of the main ways to educate children and adolescents with VI. The curriculum is the same with regular schools. However, teachers can lower the difficulties of the teaching content and requirements, and add teaching time. Although LRC is considered as the dominant component of the Chinese special education service, special schools are actually the main aspects of compulsory education offerings for children and adolescents with VI. All special schools for students with VI implemented the subject curriculum using the guidelines of the nine-year compulsory education curriculum program for special schools, which contains three types of curricula: moral education classes (e.g. morality and life, morality and society), the developmental courses (e.g. information technology, Chinese, Math, Art, Music, English, Physical education and health), and the compensatory courses (e.g. comprehensive rehabilitation training, orientation and mobility, society adaptation). The teaching material is reduced, in which the teachers use braille in their instruction. The schools especially emphasized physical teaching, considering programs of physical education and exercises related to physical training courses to be core subjects because most students with VI lacked physical exercise, and their ability to manage themselves was poor (Nan, 1995). Generally, the physical achievements of students with VI in special schools are maintained at higher levels due to the school leads and teachers paying more attention to their physical education teaching.

In addition, those with VI who could not attend the schools or need special personnel receive their compulsory education through teacher-delivered home/communities/child welfare-based instruction (State Council of the PRC, 2017).

4. Further Education for Students with VI

Chinese adolescents with VI receive further education in senior high school departments in regular or special schools. Students with VI in the senior high schools use the same curriculum as their peers without disabilities. The objectives of the regular senior high schools are to improve the overall quality of students with VI, train them to be a qualified graduate from senior high school, and have the potential to be enrolled in college for receiving higher education (Ge, 2014). By 2020, there were a total of 104 special classes in regular senior middle schools in China, which provided education for 1,491 students with VI (Federation of Chinese Individuals of Disabilities, 2021).

Students with VI in the senior high school department of special schools receive effective vocational educational programs for entering society and being able to support themselves. The specials provide a series of majors for the youth with VI to learn labor skills for various occupations, such as acupuncture (针灸, zhenjiu), massage, vehicle repair, gardening, knitting, ceramics, raising livestock, music, and piano technician (Zhao & Du, 2014). By 2020, there were a total of 147 vocational educational classes in special schools in China, which serve 1,011 students with VI (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2021).

5. Higher Education for Students with VI

The Chinese youth with VI receives higher education in regular institutions of higher education or higher special education colleges. In regular institutions of higher education, students with VI received the same curriculum with their peers without disabilities. However, the majors that they can choose is limited within English, psychology in special education, special education, social work, and so on. By 2020, a total of 12,362 youth with disabilities were recruited by regular institutions of higher education.

The Chinese government implemented special higher education policies for students with VI and hearing impairments for increasing their opportunities of receiving higher education. Changchun University established the first higher special education college in 1987, which adopted individually setting the enrollment plan and organization entrance exams and recruiting. To date, China has a total of 22 higher special education colleges and 2,053 youth with disabilities were studying in the higher special education colleges (Federation of Chinese Individuals of Disabilities, 2021). Youth with VI can obtain their Bachelor's degree in the higher special education colleges, majoring in science of acupuncture, rehabilitation therapeutics, music performance, special education, English, and Chinese language and literature.

6. Discussion

The Chinese government offers free and relatively equal compulsory educational opportunities for children and adolescents with different levels of VI. However, the provision of education for students with VI during the compulsory education stage comprises three main problems. First, although the LRC was implemented by the Chinese government to fulfill the learning needs of children and adolescents with disabilities and the idea of inclusive education is accepted by scholars (Deng & Zhu, 2016; Ding, 2007), special schools are the main education placements and provides boarding facilities for children with disabilities in China. However, the resources for special schools and teachers are limited, especially for teaching using textbooks and materials (Fu, Lu, Xiao, & Wang, 2020), which may result in the supporting facilities and services from the schools failing to match the curriculum and learning environment (Alduais & Deng, 2019). Limited studies have examined and evaluated the holistic development of Chinese students with VI in special schools. Although the special schools for students with VI do not provide plenty of academic pressure to students, we still need to know the quality of learning of students with VI (the academic performance, school adaptation skills, and life skills) in special schools. Second, although the provisions of education in regular schools expanded to more students with VI within regular schools, LRC could not offer the appropriate education for them. Under the same curriculums and lack of support from schools and teachers, students with VI could not understand the teaching content, follow the study schedules, and fulfill the demands. In addition, bullies and poor attitudes exist in the schools, which could aggravate their isolation (Qi, Wang, & Ha, 2017). Third, although teacher-delivered home/communities/child welfare delivery is implemented for Chinese children and adolescents with VI by various levels of educational department, no studies reported the efficacy of this way of education. There is urgent need to examine its actual outcomes of the learning and developments of children and adolescents with VI.

Students with VI do encounter similar embarrassment when they study in regular senior high schools. They have no special curricula, textbooks, or professional teaching resources and support from schools. However, they face the same academic pressure with their peers without VI. Academic gains and competition are considered as the highest priority by parents and schools in Chinese senior high schools (Yan, Deng, & Ma, 2018). Furthermore, the schools generally set many plans (e.g. Peiyou plan, Bajian Plan) for nurturing and promoting outstanding students to be enrolled by the top-class universities, which are unrelated to students with disabilities. The learning, performance, and progress of students with VI in regular senior high schools may mainly reply on the capabilities of students with VI to cope with "learning" and "life". Students with VI studying in the high school department in the special schools mainly receive vocational education. The hope is that these students with VI will be more employable when they finish school. However, the vocation educational system in special schools is experiencing expansion and construction in China. Their defects on lacking in educational programs may weaken the quality of vocational education. In addition, Chinese students with VI generally could not participate in activities of choice-making, advocacy skills, and other active citizenship experiences, which may negatively

influence their learning and experiences when they graduated from schools. Occupational skills and employability in disability may benefit from effective vocational education and training (Scheef, Barrio, & Poppen, 2017). Chinese special schools should pay more attention to the important meaning of vocational education on enhancing social mobility and inclusion of students with VI when they enter society.

With the sustainable and rapid development of the economy and the improvement of social civilization levels in China, the rights to receive higher education of Chinese youth with disabilities are better maintained and strengthened. The Chinese government has offered more opportunities for the youth with disabilities for receiving their post-secondary education. However, compared with the general population, the youth with disabilities had a lower rate of enrollment and attendance (Li & Fu, 2015). In addition, students with VI have overly limited course and major choices, which are limited to those based on touching and sound (science of acupuncture, music performance). Programs and course choices should be developed toward caring for the potential benefits of interested, academic, or vocational needs for students with VI during their college stage.

Except for compulsory education, secondary education, and post-secondary education, preschool education for children with VI in China should be cautioned and be paid more attention. The rate of enrollment in preschool, regardless of special schools and general kindergartens, were excessively low, although every level of the Chinese government encourages special schools and general kindergarten schools to support the preschool education for children with VI. According to the basic statistics of special education from the educational department of China, only 91 children with VI were attending schools for receiving preschool education by 2020 (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2021). Early childhood special education is very important for development of children with disabilities. Thus, preschool should be seen as a crucial step in offering accessible and qualified education and promote the development, learning, and well-being in children with VI.

7. Conclusion

Chinese special education for children and adolescents with VI should be strengthened toward an equitable education system with increased support and staff training, regardless of the type of setting (Shaw, 2017; Yan et al., 2018).

References

- Alduais, A., & Deng, M. (2019). The effect of the National Plan (2010-2020) on the development of special education in China: Evidence from before-after design at a 7-year interval. *Education Sciences*, 9, 95. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci9020095>
- Committee of the National People's Congress. (1982). *Constitution of the People Republic of China*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-03/22/content_5276319.htm
- Committee of the National People's Congress. (1984). *The Compulsory Education Law of the People Republic of China*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-10/29/content_5647617.htm
- Deng, M., & Harris, K. (2008). Meeting the needs of students with disabilities in general education classrooms in China. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 31(3), 195-207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406408330631>
- Deng, M., & Zhu, X. (2016). Special education reform towards inclusive education: Blurring or expanding boundaries of special and regular education in China. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16, 994-998. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12244>
- Ding, Y. (2007). Inclusive education: The developmental tendency, meaning, and enlightenment of contemporary education. *Studies in Foreign Education*, 34, 22-26.
- Federation of Chinese Individuals of Disabilities. (2021). *Bulletin of the Statistics on Project for Individuals with Disabilities on Year 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdpc.org.cn//zwgk/zccx/tjgb/d4baf2be2102461e96259fdf13852841.htm>
- Fu, W. Q., Lu, S., Xiao, F., & Wang, M. (2020). A social-cultural analysis of the individual education plan practice in special education schools in China. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 66(1), 54-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2018.1482853>
- Ge, Y P. (2014). Discussion on evaluation on schools for students with visual impairments. *A Journal Modern Special Education (Chinese)*, 3, 12-14.
- Li, X. H., & Fu, Z. J. (2015). From isolation to integration? The history, characteristics, and policies of higher education for individuals with visual impairments in China. *Journal of Social Work (Chinese)*, 6, 35-46+126.

<https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-4828.2015.06.004>

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2014). *The notice of special education promotion plan (2014-2016)*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-01/18/content_8358.htm
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2017). *The notice of special education promotion plan (2017-2020)*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-07/28/content_5214071.htm
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2020). *Number of students of formal education by type and level*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2020/quanguo/202108/t20210831_556364.html
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2021). *Basic information of special education*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2020/quanguo/202108/t20210831_556466.html
- Nan, D. Q. (1995). *Special education in Beijing: An overview*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED397567.pdf>
- Qi, J., Wang, L. J., & Ha, A. (2017). Perception of Hong Kong physical education teachers on the inclusion of students with disabilities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 37(1), 86-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1169992>
- Scheef, A. R., Barrio, B. L., & Poppen, M. I. (2017). Developing partnerships with businesses to support job training for youth with disabilities in Singapore. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 40(3), 156-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143416630242>
- Shaw, A. (2017). Inclusion: The role of special and mainstream schools. *British Journal of Special Education*, 44(3), 292-312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12181>
- State Council of the People's Republic of China. (1951). The decision of reforming the school system of Chinese government. *Bulletin of the City of Tianjin Government*, 29, 1-3.
- State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2017). *Regulation for the Individuals with Disabilities of the People's Republic of China*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-12/26/content_5575055.htm
- State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2019). *China's Education Modernization 2035*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-02/23/content_5367987.htm
- The Third Session of the Eighth National People's Congress. (1995). *Education Law of the People Republic of China*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/28/content_5028401.htm
- Xiao, F. (2007). The Chinese 'Learning in Regular Classroom': History, current situation, and prospects. *Chinese Education and Society*, 40(4), 8-20. <https://doi.org/10.2753/CED1061-1932400401>
- Yan, T. R., Deng, M., & Ma, Y. (2018). Chinese regular education teachers' perceptions of the holistic development of students with special educational needs in inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(6), 686-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1572233>
- Zhao, X. H., & Du, L. P. (2014). The development and strategies on secondary vocational education for three categories of persons with disabilities. *Chinese Journal of Special Education (Chinese)*, 1, 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1007-3728.2014.01.003>

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Prof. Jing Qi: Original draft and writing. Ms. Yan Li: Data collection and editing. Dr. Wenhong Xu: Revising and review. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This paper is supported by "Zhejiang Students Technology and Innovation Program", Zhejiang Normal University (2023R404079).

Competing interests

All of the authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.