

People Don't Practice What They Preach? Inclusive Educational Policy and Exclusionary Practices for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in China's Compulsory Education: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

Purpose: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by behavioral deficits. In China, children with ASD find themselves critically challenged due to inadequate support and insufficient awareness among the general public.

Methods: This paper illustrates the implementation of Learning in Regular Classroom Program (LRC) in China, comparing and deconstructing the special education policies in two consecutive phases in a southern metropolis in China.

Results: A Critical assessment reveals 1) retrogression in guiding principles, 2) inconsistent models of disabilities, 3) consistent use of enrolment rate as Key Performance Index (KPI) and 4) non-mandatory use of language to guide implementation.

Conclusion: The widening gap between the conceptualization and realization of the LRC in China is beyond question. Suggested solutions are: 1) professional projection of possible challenges for children with ASD; 2) adequate supply of resource classrooms and special education teachers appointed for the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP); 3) a statutory code of practice in ASD studies.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, China, compulsory education

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neuro-developmental disorder, is characterized by behavioral deficits. To receive a diagnosis of ASD, individuals must exhibit two of the four following symptoms: 1) excessively repetitive motor movements, object use, and speech; 2) insistence on sameness, inflexible routines, or ritualized behavior; 3) abnormally intense interests, or interests marked by an unusual focus; 4) a hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association 2013; World Health Organization 2018). Based on the regional survey conducted by several provincial governments in China, it is estimated that there are 10 million individuals diagnosed with ASD, among which 2 million are children (Wucailu ASD Research Center, 2024). The population of ASD is increasing at an acute rate of 200 thousand per year. Unequivocally, ASD constitutes a serious dilemma confronting China's educational system.

China's Learning in Regular Classroom programme (LRC), launched in the 1980s, aims to meet the need of students with disabilities to access the nine-year compulsory education (Zhang & Spencer, 2015). However, the availability of LRC to children on the autism spectrum commenced only around 10 years ago due to a lack of knowledge of autism in the country ("International day of disabled persons", 2022). Despite educational policies enacted to improve the LRC programme, children with autism still face numerous difficulties, and the LRC programme is accused of being a primitive form of Western inclusive education (Wang & Wang, 2022). Therefore, to ensure the implementation of special education policies, the central government requires each city to issue its own action plan parallel to the national 14th Enhancement Plan of Special Education for Disabled Students (MOE, 2022). The contradictory models of disabilities underlying local special education policies lack specified guidance and obligations for front-line professionals, thus leading to personal tragedy for students with autism in most schools. First, a brief history of the LRC programme is provided to clarify that the involvement of children with

autism in compulsory education is trailing behind that of children with other disabilities. Following this, a comparison and deconstruction of the local special education policies in two consecutive phases of a southern city in China is set forth to reveal the retrogression in guiding principles due to fluctuations in political ideology, inconsistent models for disabilities, consistent use of enrolment rate as a key performance index (KPI) and lack of language mandating implementation. Thereafter, the statistically harsh reality of students with autism under the LRC programme is revealed, and causes for dropping out from mainstream schools are presented, highlighting the gap between conceptualization and realization of the LRC programme in China. Finally, recommendations are given such as projecting possible challenges for children with autism to prepare them for primary school education better, providing an adequate supply of resource classrooms and special education teachers for the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), and introducing paraprofessionals such as teaching assistants (TA) into the LRC programme.

2. History of special education in China and LRC

The Chinese Learning in Regular Classroom programme (LRC) for students with disabilities commenced in the 1980s, signifying governmental efforts toward inclusive education (Zhang & Spencer, 2015). However, due to a lack of basic knowledge about ASD, it was not until 2006 that ASD was included in the government's list of disabilities ("International day of disabled persons", 2022). In 2011, the government at long last legitimized the involvement of autistic children in the LRC programme in its revised policy ("Management of learning in regular classroom for students with disabilities", 2021). This was when China's Compulsory Education Law had been running for more than 25 years. Prior to that, children with autism were largely deprived of their right of education (Clark et al., 2019).

Subsequently, the Chinese government has issued numerous policies and regulations to improve the educational outlook for children with ASD. However, options for children with ASD remain limited. The first is the well-funded special education schools, which mainly provide vocational training (Clark et al., 2019). Still, these schools do not usually accommodate students' academic needs (MOE, 2016). Another practical concern is the inconvenient location of special education schools (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023). Therefore, the second option, the LRC programme, where children with disabilities receive the nine-year compulsory education, is favored by the majority of parents.

As a pragmatic measure, the LRC programme is also highly recommended by the government, based on China's socioeconomic conditions (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). For example, the data from the latest report issued in April 2023 shows about 45.50% of autistic children of compulsory education age are now in the LRC programme in mainstream schools (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023).

However, the LRC programme for children with autism in China is facing numerous problems in practice despite countless policies issued by the government to improve the situation, for successful LRC comprises more than policies and facilities (Clark et al., 2019). Effective implementation by frontline professionals is the key (Li et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in China, regular teachers struggle to implement LRC, due to limited understanding of ASD, class size, and pressure from parents of regular students (Li et al., 2022). Moreover, the gap between conceptualization of LRC and realization results from discretionary policies (Zhang & Spencer, 2015). To date, in China, no statutory code of practice is in place for the implementation of education for children with disabilities (Clark et al., 2019). In addition, a number of inconsistencies mark local policy discourses. How disability is perceived in policies is important, as the discourse related to students with disabilities influences people's expectations and interactions with them (Barton, 2009, cited in Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

3. Two contrasted Models of Disability Discourse

The two prominent models of disability discourse are the medical and social model (LoBianco & Sheppard-Jones, 2008). The medical model holds that fixing the impairment is the soundest path toward function and independence, while the social model of disability promotes the full integration of students with disability into society (Roush & Sharby, 2011).

According to the social model, equal access for students with an impairment/disability is a human rights issue (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). As such, it is the various barriers imposed by society, physical as well as attitudinal, that engender disability. Therefore, physical impairment and disability imposed by society constitute two discrete concepts. Special education policy guided by the social model aims to remove various barriers to ensure the educational rights of students with disabilities. Under the social model, the right to treatment or service is self-referential and experience-driven (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

In high-income Western countries, policy formulation based on the medical model is negatively evaluated by

researchers supporting the educational rights discourses. Barton (2009) claimed that the mechanisms employed in society exclude some individuals because the less-valued aspects of these people are highlighted and denigrated (as cited in Haegele & Hodge, 2016, p.199). Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009) are even opposed to the diction of “special education”. They claimed that policies labeled with “special educational needs” follow the medical or deficit models of disability, which highlights students’ deficits. Therefore, in high-income Western countries, the social model of disability holds that governmental policies should avoid labels such as “special needs” because language can exert a positive or negative image (Corbett, 1996, cited in Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009). Instead, the “rights” of students with disabilities to access inclusive education should be prioritized to ensure equality, and various disabling barriers should be removed.

The overall picture of disability does not indicate that one model should be obviated. For example, under the medical model, access to treatment or services, including the opportunity to learn in regular classrooms, hinges upon a medical diagnosis. This model is common practice in the LRC programme of many Chinese cities. For a student with autism to be involved in the LRC programme, a mental or intellectual disability card is generally issued by China Disabled People’s Federation (CDFP) based on designated professional evaluation. Despite the criticism of the medical model, it is not feasible to abandon this, given China’s population of students with disabilities and limited educational resources (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023). Currently, a disability card functions as an important professional gatekeeper to ensure that limited resources will be properly allocated. With a disability card, the family of an autistic child can receive free medical support and other significant benefits, thus relieving some financial burden. Therefore, one-sided support of the social model fails to account for the lived experiences of students with disabilities (Palmer & Harley, 2012).

4. Deconstruction and Comparison of Two Action Plans

In China, no statutory code of practice for the frontline workforce is in place with respect to autism. Rather, overarching special education policies from local education authorities function without mandatory guidance at the municipal level (Clark et al., 2019). This report attempts to deconstruct the discourses pertaining to two localized action plans of the governmental special education enhancement plans for students with disabilities, reflected in two policy documents from Guangzhou, in southern China. The first document (hereafter referred to as Document A) is the Phase II Special Education Enhance Plan of Special Education for Students with Disabilities (2017-2020) (GZ BOE, 2017). The second document (hereafter referred to as Document B) is the Guangzhou 14th Five-year Action Plan of Special Education for Students with Disabilities (2020-2025) (GZ BOE, 2022). The discourse in these two documents clearly reveals the governmental intention to end discrimination against people with disabilities and to provide adequate education to all children with disabilities. A closer comparison and deconstruction of the two consecutive local policies, however, yields mixed revelations.

The words “protect the rights of education for students with disabilities” (GZ BOE, 2017) would seem to indicate that the 2017 Guangzhou Phase II Enhancement Plan takes the social model as its guiding principle. In contrast, the 2020-2025 version of action plan retrogresses to Mao’s ideology, which dominated China during the Cultural Revolution. The interesting retrogression to patriotic ideology reflected in educational policies may well be sparked by political trends in China (Lams, 2018). The different wordings of special education guiding principle suggests interpretation of inclusive education is situated in a general education policy (Magnusson et al., 2019).

China’s Compulsory Education Law mandates availability of education to all school-age students, including students with disabilities (Kritzer, 2012). Thus, enrollment rate of students with disabilities constitutes a key performance index of special education (Deng & Manset, 2000, cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004), as confirmed by both documents. However, the pursuit of enrollment rate of students with disabilities is meaningful only to the extent that it is based on an accurate estimation of the total number students with disabilities, which in China, has not been realized (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023). In the Chinese mainland, cases of reported autism are markedly lower than those of in most other regions. For example, the Shanghai Mental Health Centre conducted a meta-analysis of autism rates in Hongkong, Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, with highly uneven results (Wan et al., 2013, cited in Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023). The rate of the other two areas comes to 24.5/ 10000, while in the Chinese mainland, that rate is only 12.8/ 10000 (Wan et al., 2013, as cited in Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p. 3).

The reasons for the low occurrence rates of autism in Chinese mainland are twofold. In the first place, there is no standardized national screening service for autism yet in China (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023). Secondly, many children with autism are unidentified due to the reluctance of families to report (Tang & Bie, 2016). Autism is still stigmatized as mental disorder despite the increasing awareness about

autism in China (Chan & Lam, 2018). In reality, policy formulation based on inaccurate estimation of autism rate has aroused researchers' attention (Clark et al., 2019). It is suggested the Chinese government does not have reliable data to base its decision to allocate educational resources that will ensure equity treatment of children with autism at compulsory schooling age (Zhou et al., 2020).

Lack of explicit discourse of accountability on frontline workforce would project the doom of the government's ambitions in Document B. Thus, the objective of building "a Guangzhou mode of high-quality special education that aims to meet the need of every child with disabilities" (GZ BOE, 2022, para. 7) will remain but words in document. To illustrate, a recent national survey issued in April of 2023 indicates only 6% of mainstream schools under the LRC programme provide IEP to children with autism (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.99).

5. Harsh Statistical Reality of LRC for Autistic Students

Before effective and concrete recommendations are proposed, a report on statistics related to autistic dropouts from the LRC programme is required. The national survey conducted by Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children (2023) indicates over 50% of autistic dropouts from mainstream schools occurs in Grade 1 (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.102), which suggests sharp variances between primary school education and that of pre-school. Immediate transition from pre-school education to primary schools without preparatory measures presents redoubtable barriers to students with autism.

Moreover, statistics show a continuing drop-out trend through Grade 4, exceeding 80% for students with autism under the LRC programme (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.102). This means that with the increased difficulty of learning, students with autism under the LRC programme undergo even more struggles, in part due to failure to adjust to the teaching style of regular teachers (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.102). The LRC programme in reality violates the principle of inclusive education, wherein teachers accommodate the needs of students with disabilities (Clark et al., 2019).

36.7% of autistic dropouts from mainstream schools occur at the request of parents (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.103). Still, the reasons for these parental decisions stem from the gap between their children and regular students in academic learning; 61.5% of parents complained that their autistic children with autism are unable to keep up, and 6.2% experienced loss of emotional control due to such pressures (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.103).

On the other hand, 41.7% of dropouts are non-voluntary, of which 92% are mandated by the schools and 8% result from the demands of parents of students without autism (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.103). In the majority of cases, the cited grounds are "disruptive behaviors" (Investigation Team of Chinese Families with Autistic Children, 2023, p.103). In this regard, in China, the exam-oriented education system is extremely competitive, placing great pressure on mainstream schools as well as parents. In turn, teachers face pressure from parents of regular students, who insist that they meet the needs of the majority of students (Xiong et al., 2011).

6. Recommendation to Fill in the Gap between Policy and Practice

Based on the previous statistical report for distribution of reasons that autistic students drop out, the following recommendations are meant for frontline workforce as well as parents of children with autism.

Firstly, to assist in the transition from pre-schools to primary schools, a professional evaluation to clarify possible challenges followed by intervention based on an EBP (Evidence-based Practices) is highly recommended (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In addition, adequate financial support from the local government for the EBP intervention is necessary to better prepare children with autism to transit from pre-school education to primary school inclusive education.

Secondly, to reduce the dropout rate stemming from an academic gap between students with autism and regular students, recommendations are twofold.

With government assistance, schools must build resource classrooms and introduce teachers with a background in teaching autistic children to the LRC programme, so that whenever an autistic student struggles, an effective IEP (Individual Education Plan) may be implemented in the resource classroom by that teacher. In addition, parents should avail themselves of professional evaluation of the child's capabilities in order to determine whether LRC is the better choice for their child. Ultimately, it is imperative that the current LRC programme in mainstream schools better accommodate the practical needs of children with autism, particularly with respect to teachers and teaching content. In addition, parents should make rational choices based on the attributes of their children.

Thirdly, to tackle challenging behavior from children with autism in regular educational settings, paraprofessionals such as teaching assistants, are recommended. When a student with autism accommodates to the LRC programme with support from a special education teacher, schools can withdraw the service of teaching assistants to foster better independence and sociability (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). To reduce the financial burden on families, local government should subsidize teaching assistance in the home.

7. Conclusion

A deconstruction and comparison of two local governments attempts to reveal the underlying problems at the policy level in Chinese special education policies and ultimately to forestall harsh consequences for students with autism. Besides the specific recommendation to frontline workforce involved in the Chinese LRC programme, an urgent call is made for a statutory code of practice for special education in China so that mandatory implementation may be legislated.

The limitations of this report are also evident. More mixed method research is needed for understanding the status quo of inclusive education for children with autism in the Chinese mainland, with a greater range of solutions to the problems confronting them. This being said, it is hoped the present report may reveal the gap between conceptualization and realization of the LRC programme in China so that the educational rights of children with autism may be more effectively protected.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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