

APPROPRIATE INTEGRATION: CHINA'S "LEARNING IN REGULAR CLASSES" POLICY

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Abstract: This review examines China's "Learning in Regular Classes" policy, aimed at integrating children with special needs, particularly those with hearing impairments, into mainstream education. The study utilizes policy analysis and literature review methodologies to assess the alignment of the policy with the ideals of appropriate integration. Findings indicate that while the policy reflects an intent towards inclusivity, there are significant gaps in implementation, especially in effectively integrating students with hearing impairments. These gaps are attributed to inadequate support systems, lack of specialized training for teachers, and insufficient adaptations within mainstream environments. The review calls for a reevaluation of the policy to address these disparities, ensuring a truly inclusive educational framework.

Keywords: Learning in regular classes; Hearing impaired children; Appropriate integration

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every citizen regardless of their social class, race, beliefs, or physical and mental differences." [1]. In June 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) passed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. The declaration stated that children with special educational needs should be accommodated in inclusive schools that can meet their needs and use child-centred teaching methods to provide learning support (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). With the actions of UNESCO, the concept of inclusive education has become a global policy vision [2].

The education philosophy advocated by inclusive education, which includes zero rejection, creating an environment that enables success for all children, inclusiveness, equity, and respecting the diverse learning needs of each student, has greatly promoted the renewal and transformation of traditional education. In China, the policy of Learning in Regular Class has been the main approach to implementing inclusive education. Since the late 1980s, Learning in Regular Classes has always played a primary role in accommodating and educating children with special needs [3]. In the 1990s, the scale of special education expanded rapidly, playing a decisive role in improving the enrollment rate of compulsory education for children and adolescents with disabilities. The policy of Learning in Regular Classes is the localized development trend of international inclusive education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020), reflecting the theoretical and practical paradigm of inclusive education with Chinese characteristics.

Since the 21st century, Learning in Regular Classes has been written into newly revised laws and regulations such as the *Compulsory Education Law*, the *Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities*, and the *Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities*, significantly enhancing its legal status and expanding its scope from compulsory education to the entire education system [4]. special education topic assessment report issued by National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) shows that the quality of Learning in Regular Classes is worrisome, especially in the integration of students with hearing impairments, where many problems exist [5]. This is mainly manifested in the physical mixing characteristics of "attending classes without participating" or "mixing without integrating." As students with hearing impairments progress through grades, they continuously "return" from regular schools to special education schools. According to the results of the Basic Statistics on Education Development by the Ministry of Education of China [6], the proportion of students included in regular classrooms dropped from 69.86% in 2001 to 49.47% in 2020. The frequent questioning of teaching quality in inclusion in regular classrooms and the phenomenon of returning, as well as the reasons behind it, have attracted the attention of scholars. Several scholars have pointed out that the difficulty in ensuring integration at the social and teaching levels is the main reason for the return of students with hearing impairments [7]. The overall development of inclusive education in China is facing the dilemma of bridging theory with practice, balancing equity with efficiency, and balancing commonality with individuality. "The effect of Learning in Regular Classes has lost the original intention of inclusive education". In this paper, I attempt to whether the policy Learning in Regular Classes reflects appropriate integrated education for children with hearing impairments in China by highlighting the individual and social models of disability in an inclusive educational environment. This paper also aims to provide valuable suggestions for the theoretical development of inclusive education in China by integrating the advantages and reasonable components of various disability models.

2 CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

2.1 Inclusive Education and Related Policies

Learning in the Regular Classes refers to a method of integrating capable special students into mainstream education, an important form of placing special students for education in China, and a key means to achieve inclusive education [8]. According to the definition by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we, in this paper, refer to "children with special education needs" as an umbrella term for special students. Special students are those who require additional resources or practices to ensure they have equal opportunities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers. This term encompasses children with disabilities, children with learning difficulties, and children living under disadvantaged conditions.

Inclusive education in China has been in existence since the late 1980s. In 1994, the *Provisional Measures for the Education of Disabled Children and Adolescents in Regular Classes* were formulated and promulgated. As inclusive education has continued to develop, an increasing number of special children have entered mainstream schools for education. Inclusive education legally ensures the right of disabled children to receive education equally [9]. In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Work of Inclusive Education at the Compulsory Education Stage for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities*, which is China's second special guidance document issued 26 years later on inclusive education, explicitly proposing to "adhere to scientific assessment, include as fully as possible, respect differences, teach students in accordance with their aptitude, integrate general and special education, enhance quality, and achieve equitable and quality development of special education" to promote the high-quality development of special education. In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Work of Inclusive Education at the Compulsory Education Stage for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities*, which is China's second special guidance document issued 26 years later on inclusive education, explicitly proposing to "adhere to scientific assessment, include as fully as possible, respect differences, teach students in accordance with their aptitude, integrate general and special education, enhance quality, and achieve equitable and quality development of special education" to promote the high-quality development of special education. In 2021, the General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China also explicitly proposed in the 14th Five-Year Basic Education Plan to aim for appropriate integration in providing quality special education.

2.2 Children with Hearing Impairments

Hearing impairment (hereinafter referred to as "hearing loss") is a condition caused by various reasons that result in the inability to hear or difficulty hearing sounds around, affecting daily life and work [10], and is classified under special students. In China, severe hearing loss is defined as a hearing loss of 41 to 70 dB. Students who meet the requirements for inclusive education often have undergone cochlear implant surgery or wear hearing aids. These students are at the intersection of normal and abnormal hearing. This study will focus on these hearing-impaired students who qualify for inclusive education.

2.3 Reverse Inclusion

Reverse Inclusion describes the phenomenon where, during the process of inclusive education, students commonly encounter difficulties in learning, lack of concentration, low self-esteem, and insufficient classroom participation, etc., which can easily prompt their return to special schools [11]. In this paper, the focus is on the phenomenon of hearing-impaired students returning from mainstream schools to special schools for the deaf during inclusive education. The phenomenon of Reverse Inclusion is contrary to the current advocacy of inclusive education philosophy.

3 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY AND DISABILITY MODELS

3.1 The Individual and Social Models of Disability

The individual model of disability has always carried forward the value system and ethics of traditional society, defining disability as a personal issue of the disabled individual. Society tends to respond to disability with a negative attitude, underlying the assumption that disability is a personal matter of the disabled individual, unrelated to society. Therefore, the cause, fault, and responsibility are considered purely individual [12].

With the progress of science and technology and the liberation of thought, many doctors and other enlightened members of society began to focus on the medical roots of disability in the mid-19th century, striving to find treatments for disabled people, giving rise to the medical model, which became increasingly popular. The medical model sees disability as a medical issue existing within the individual. It is a defect or malfunction of the bodily system leading to an abnormal and pathological condition [13]. The goal of intervention is to cure, improve physical condition and rehabilitation to the greatest extent possible (i.e., the disabled person adapts to their physical condition and environment). Disabled individuals are expected to utilize the various services provided to them and spend time playing the role of a patient or learner with the help of trained professionals. For medical professionals adhering to the disability medical model, disabled people should appropriately play the "patient" role if they wish to receive ongoing help and support. However, in the disadvantages of the medical model's "sick role" approach, especially in relation to many

chronic illness sufferers or disabled people who do not consider themselves sick [14]. Moreover, the “sick role” approach fails to consider the important distinction between impairment and illness. As Thomas & Woods (2003) pointed out, “Many disabled people are not sick but have a continuing impairment, which does not manifest as a daily health problem”(p.15) [15].

Inspired by the British disability movement of the 1960s and 70s, the social model of disability was developed in response to the limitations of the medical model. The social model views society as “disabling people with impairments and therefore any meaningful solution must target social change rather than individual adjustment and rehabilitation”. The social model particularly focuses on addressing the “barriers to participation” that disabled people encounter due to various advantageous social and environmental factors in society. In recent years, The Social Model is having a significant impact on the traditional Individual Model or Medical Model [16]. In China, the social work approach for disabled individuals is shifting from the Individual Model towards the Social Model, with a trend towards integrating both models. The inclusive education policy for Chinese children with hearing impairments is a typical embodiment of the integration of these two models.

3.2 Deconstructing the Medical and Social Models in China’s Inclusive Education

Although there are stark differences between the medical and social models in terms of how disabled people are identified and defined, the two are not entirely separate. China's inclusive education policy, which aims for equal educational rights, embodies the perspectives of the social model while integrating features of the medical model. For example, inclusion of children with hearing impairments in regular classes often requires students to have undergone cochlear implant surgery or to wear hearing aids. The two models together have formed a continuum, moving from opposition to integration. Inclusive education demands changes in children with hearing impairments to make them closer to 'normal' before reintegrating them into mainstream society. Practically, the inclusion of children with hearing impairments represents a shift from the medical to the social model, achieving appropriate integration. However, in terms of practical outcomes, the equality manifested in inclusive education is merely formal. Inclusive education predicates on ability, allowing only "disabled children who can keep up with the class" the possibility to learn in regular classrooms, focusing mainly on visual impairments, hearing impairments, and mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. During the inclusion process, teachers often do not accommodate individual differences among disabled students but instead require them to become like their non-disabled peers, pursuing a form of homogeneous equality. Fu and Wang’s qualitative study on the phenomenon of students returning to special education also points out: although national laws explicitly grant special children the right to attend regular schools, whether they can benefit from mainstream education still depends on the special children's level of ability, with those unable to meet the requirements of regular school learning being redirected back to special schools [17]. The homogeneous equality view of traditional education hinders students in inclusive education from pursuing equal educational opportunities.

On the other hand, China's special education (including inclusive education) has long adhered to a medical model of disability, overlooking the deficiencies in the social environment and ignoring the interaction between social expectations and individual abilities. Teachers and administrators tend to understand children from the perspectives of their problems, symptoms, and differences from non-disabled children, amplifying the disabilities; they predispose to a dichotomy of normal versus abnormal when facing special and non-special children; in education, the aim is to eliminate the differences in special children, changing and treating the disability itself. This represents a unidimensional demand on disabled people, without requiring substantial changes from non-disabled people [18].

The *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* states that disability does not necessarily lead to handicap; it only becomes a handicap when there is a conflict between the disability and the environment or societal attitudes towards disability. From this rule, it is evident that the inclusion of children with hearing impairments in China has not achieved equal opportunities, but the social model has promoted the shift of these students from segregation to integration. From the international perspective of inclusive education, it is a method that encourages diversity and promotes equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of any differences they may have. Thus, theoretically, China’s inclusive education policy contradicts the social construct of disability upheld by popular international inclusive education. However, what constitutes inclusive education remains debatable. Therefore, to answer whether China’s inclusive education policy is appropriately integrated, an analysis of the practical outcomes of inclusive education for children with hearing impairments is needed.

3.3 Reasons for the Reverse Inclusion Phenomenon of Children with Hearing Impairments in Mainstream Classes in China

Existing research indicates that the reverse inclusion phenomenon of children with hearing impairments in mainstream classes is a significant and complex issue within China's special education system, involving schools, families, society, and the unique characteristics of children with hearing impairments.

Firstly, the technical or equipment support in schools is still lacking. This results in deaf or hard-of-hearing children not being able to fully participate in learning under conditions similar or close to those of other children. Many of these children wear hearing aids or have cochlear implants. Whether they can communicate smoothly, establish good interpersonal relationships, and achieve effective learning largely depends on whether they can "hear clearly" and

"understand and express themselves." Hearing clearly involves issues with the equipment. If the hearing compensation effect of the hearing aid is not ideal, it will affect the child's reception of information. "Understanding" involves issues related to the rehabilitation education of deaf children, such as how teachers can teach these children to understand and express themselves in various ways. Many scholars have found in their research on the reintegration of deaf children that due to not understanding the content of the lessons and not being able to keep up with the pace of regular schools, these students develop feelings of inferiority, passivity, confusion, and panic, leading to a lack of motivation to learn. Therefore, the language barriers and psychological issues of deaf children are one of the objective reasons for their reintegration challenges. [19]

Secondly, the social support system needs improvement. Children with hearing impairments in mainstream classes require a comprehensive social support system, necessitating collaboration among rehabilitation institutions, civil affairs, disabled persons' federations, mainstream schools, special education schools, teachers, and parents. Currently, such a social support system is not yet established. Children with hearing impairments move directly from rehabilitation institutions to mainstream schools, where educational philosophies and teaching models differ. There is a lack of transitional and adaptive phases[11]. Therefore, the students in inclusive education seldom receive personalized teaching support in regular classrooms, making it difficult for them to succeed within them. This further explains why many children with hearing impairments in mainstream classes "return" to special schools or institutions.

It is evident that without a comprehensive support system in special education, indiscriminately placing special children in regular classes is not the wisest choice.

Thirdly, parents' attitudes and behaviors also impact the reverse inclusion issue. Research shows that special children's parents' educational expectations, understanding of special education, and the quality of home education directly affect the learning and social development of children with hearing impairments. For example, parents' expectations for special children may be unrealistic. Lack of accurate judgment of children's abilities and needs can lead to inappropriate educational methods, affecting children's adaptability and learning effectiveness in regular schools [20].

Therefore, by analyzing the reasons of the reverse inclusion of children with hearing impairments, a conclusion can be drawn that when educating special children, besides providing cognitive training for parents, it is essential to fully consider the students' abilities and disabilities. The most suitable placement method for special children should be selected based on the type, degree of disability, and existing placement conditions. Teaching according to students' capabilities is a form of educational equity. If special children who are currently unsuitable for mainstream classes are placed in regular classes, where teachers are unable to teach and peers do not accept them, causing these students to be neglected and waste time in regular classes, this does not align with the original intent of inclusive education.

4 EVALUATION OF CHINA'S INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

4.1 Philosophical Reflections on the Reverse Inclusion for Children with Hearing Impairments in China

The concept of inclusive education, originating from the human rights movement of the 1960s, emphasizes that disabled people should enjoy the same educational rights as the general population, as clearly articulated in the Salamanca Statement. This overturned the "separate but equal" dual-track education system, reintegrating disabled individuals into mainstream society. This ideology a noble ideal, a philosophical thought, a notion and attitude, rather than something practical. The practice of inclusive education in China, especially the situation of hearing-impaired children attending regular classes, reveals the discrepancy between ideology and actual implementation [21].

Supporters of the social model of disability argue that disabilities and special needs in education are the result of social constructs. That is, difficulties and needs are often caused by the rigidity of the school system and its inability to meet the diverse needs of children. This study also shows that the challenges faced by children with hearing impairments in mainstream schools are not only due to their hearing disabilities but also to the limitations of the school system in dealing with diversity and differences. However, currently in China, few students with hearing impairments are included in mainstream classes, and some do not even meet the criteria for inclusive education. It is impractical and a waste of resources to equip every school with resources for students with special educational needs. Therefore, in practice, it is necessary to consider the guidance of theory as well as the feasibility, adaptability, and efficiency of practice.

Additionally, if there are few students with special needs in an inclusive education environment in mainstream schools, but special students require additional support, this could impact the class pace, thereby affecting the progress of other students and making them feel their learning needs are not fully met, which is in itself an educational inequality.

From the analysis above, it is evident that the practice of inclusive education in China faces significant challenges.

Furthermore, this paper argues that treating inclusive education as an ethical standard to evaluate and criticize all education forms considered unjust is unscientific. The disabled population displays diversity and differences in characteristics and needs, meaning they face various challenges and difficulties within the general education system [22]. This means no single education model can meet the needs of all disabled individuals, but rather, education plans and support measures should be customized based on individual circumstances. Therefore, inclusive education should be undertaken responsibly and cautiously according to the type and degree of disability. The focus should not only be on the quantity of inclusion but also on the quality and effectiveness of inclusion.

In 2022, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education published a report on the proportion of inclusive education in EU member states for the 2018-2019 academic year, showing that the proportion of inclusive

education in EU countries reached up to 98% (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). In this context, Germany, with a lower rate of inclusive education about 20%, did not appear in the report and has been criticized by German scholars as a failed inclusive education reform [23]. However, this study believes that using the rate of inclusive education to judge the success of a country's inclusive education is unrealistic. Conversely, some of Germany's special education strategies are worth learning for China. For example, the German education system, through ability streaming, assigns students to different types of secondary schools, effectively organizing homogeneous learning groups. This streaming system has gradually been seen as a positive policy of differentiated treatment. That is, students with disabilities can choose different types of special education schools based on their own needs.

Finally, vocational education aimed at returning to mainstream society allows disabled individuals to become self-sufficient in society after vocational training. This is a well-developed special education system. This study believes that integration in society is true integration. Germany's special education experience proves that focusing on education quality and meeting individual needs is more important than simply increasing the proportion of inclusive education.

4.2 Strategic Considerations for the Reverse Inclusion of Children with Hearing Impairments in China

Firstly, the problem needs to be addressed at its root. When discussing strategies for the “reverse inclusion” of children with hearing impairments in China, the conversation often only scratches the surface, lacking in-depth solutions. For instance, strategies proposed by Chinese scholars such as personalized teaching and mental health improvement are important, but without corresponding professional support, such as technology, equipment, and rehabilitative teaching, these strategies are difficult to implement effectively. The education of children with hearing impairments in China requires not only high-quality hearing aids or cochlear implants but also a comprehensive social support system, including collaboration among rehabilitation institutions, civil affairs departments, mainstream and special schools, teachers, and parents. However, such a support system has not yet been established in most areas.

Secondly, there should be an integration of the advantages and rational components of different disability models to construct a theoretical model suited to local application. There are seldom simple answers on how to successfully implement appropriate inclusive education. Different countries face different challenges, and schools differ, leading to diverse policies. Combining the strengths and rational components of theories from different periods to integrate into a policy framework is an effective approach that meets local needs. This paper rejecting the notion of associating inclusivity with a single dominant set of values and practices. For example, if the inclusive education policy only considers the perspective of equality based on the social model and merely achieves integration in terms of where classes are conducted, it will face deep dilemmas, such as an inability to guarantee teaching quality and achieve true equality. An inclusive model should first be inclusive of various ideologies, and this inclusiveness should be a combination of emotion and rationality.

In addition, the understanding of inclusive education should pursue moderation. Moderation means that the development of inclusive education requires a coordinated education system. Whether to adopt a single-track or dual-track system, that is, full inclusion or partial inclusion, should be implemented based on specific circumstances, as long as the goal is for students to receive high-quality education and ultimately integrate into society. Therefore, in understanding inclusive education, it is crucial to fully consider the actual situation of the relevant education system, allowing it to develop moderately. China's “Guidelines for Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities” systematically summarizes nearly 40 years of experience in inclusive education practices in China, forming a practical model with Chinese characteristics. For instance, the principles of “Inclusion as much as possible” and “priority placement” reflect a rational and progressive approach from mild to severe, and from a minority to a majority of disability types in the process of realizing the equal right to education for children with disabilities [24]. These align with China's current national conditions. This study posits that inclusive education based on quality rather than quantity is what can truly achieve appropriate integration.

5 CONCLUSION

From the analysis of this study, it is clear that merely limiting China's inclusive education policy to superficial spatial integration is insufficient and does not fully reflect the appropriate integration of education for Chinese children. China's special education is currently in a new phase of construction and faces challenges, with both its theory and practice filled with uncertainties. However, it is affirmative that, over the past two years, the promotion plans and guidelines issued by the Chinese management have driven the inclusive education policy from formal integration towards improving the quality of education, gradually forming a practice model with Chinese characteristics. Yet, at the operational level, we still need to clarify the essence, from system to ideal, from ideal to practice, and from abstract to concrete, to build a more effective inclusive education system. It's essential to avoid applying idealistic thinking to the evaluation and guidance of specific practices. Therefore, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

Firstly, on an ethical and moral level, an inclusive and accepting environment should be constructed. Meanwhile, policymakers and scholars need to avoid morally hijacking inclusive education in the name of human rights and should instead use rational and diverse perspectives to coordinate the differences between various groups. On the foundation of diversity, the various models of disability (such as the individual model, social model, human rights model, etc.) should join forces, contributing their theoretical insights to the field of disability.

Secondly, in terms of educational structure, a supportive environment needs to be established. In the context of inclusive education, special education schools should become integrated, expanding their functions to become leaders in

local special education and resource support centres for inclusive education, playing a comprehensive role in education and rehabilitation. Administrative regions should also support the quality improvement of special classes in mainstream schools, allowing special students to attend schools nearby. With sound teacher qualifications, advanced theories, and economic, and policy support, an open environment for inclusive education that facilitates students attending nearby schools can be constructed. Additionally, the assessment methods for admitting special students in mainstream schools should respect student wishes, avoid excessive assessments, and allow students who have received medical model interventions to smoothly transition to mainstream schools for learning.

Thirdly, regarding the understanding of inclusive education, we need to correctly view isolation and integration. This study believes that true integration is not just about special students integrating into mainstream schools but about students being better integrated into society. Mainstream students in schools are also isolated by the class system, and in China, middle to high school transitions are isolated by the high school entrance examination system, but ultimately, all are to integrate into society. Thus, if certain forms of isolation contribute to improving the quality of special education, then this isolation is designed for better integration. Otherwise, even if disabled students are superficially integrated into schools, they may not truly integrate into society. The role of peers can be achieved in various ways, such as community activities or cooperation between mainstream and special schools.

These are the preliminary thoughts on the practice strategies of inclusive education in China from this study, which requires further research to perfect. It is hoped that China's special education can gradually develop a system and localized model of inclusive education that suits China's national conditions, contributing Chinese wisdom and experience to the international theory and practice of inclusive education.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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