

# **Special education reform towards inclusive education: Blurring or expanding boundaries of special and regular education in China**

**Meng Deng<sup>1</sup>**

**Xinhua Zhu<sup>2</sup>**

**<sup>1</sup>Institute of Special Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China; <sup>2</sup>Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China**

## **Abstract**

China has developed a three-tier special education service delivery system consisting of an array of placement options of special schools, special classes and learning in regular classrooms (LRC) (with the LRC as the major initiative) to serve students with disabilities after 1980s responding to the international trend of inclusive education mandate. How to balance the development of special education schools (classes) and inclusive education remains controversial. The authors found that special education provision in China has been improved in scale and quality with the expansion of special schools and LRC programmes both to have formed a parallel special education system. The authors argue that the boundaries between special and regular education system are enlarged and blurred in different situations. This reflects that the move towards inclusive education in China has been largely underpinned by its specific cultural values and conflicts between the pursuit of academic excellence and new goal of universalising basic education for all. The Chinese pragmatic practice of inclusive education shows that special schools should be a part of, instead of apart from, inclusive education, and thus should be re-empowered with new roles to support and facilitate inclusive education.

## **Introduction**

Inclusive education has been evolving as a universal concept that stands in the centre of discussion and debates in the field of special education in the past decades (Meijer, 2003). The full inclusion proponents even advocated an elimination of all special schools and classes (OCED, 1999).

The concepts of mainstreaming and, subsequently, inclusion were introduced to China when China was opened up to the world after Deng Xiao-ping initiated the open door reform policy in the mid-1980s (Deng and Poon- Mcbrayer, 2012). Essentially, inclusive education which was renamed as ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (LRC) has developed as the key approach to special education provision in response to the international trend of inclusive education and the domestic need of serving large numbers of children with disabilities (Deng and Harris, 2008). This paper is aimed at describing Chinese practices of delivering special education services, and analysing China’s attempt to balance the development of special education schools (classes) and inclusive education based on its specific socio-cultural context.

## **The Formation of a Three-tier Special Education Service Delivery Model**

Europeans and Americans established the earliest special education schools in China in the 19th century, and the delivery model was entirely restricted to separate schools (Deng and Guo, 2007). The number of special schools increased slowly during most of the 20th century due to the political upheaval (Yang and Wang, 1994). Until the 1980s they were the only places in the country where children with disabilities could receive school services (Xu and Shi, 1990; Ye and Piao, 1995).

A national survey in 1987 revealed that 8.17 million out of roughly 51 million people with disabilities were at school age, and less than 7% of them were enrolled in school by 1988 (Deng and Holdsworth, 2007). There was a lack of resources and expertise to build separate schools fast enough for so many children on the waiting list for a place at school (Deng and Poon-Mcbrayer, 2012).

A new special education service delivery model was advocated in 1988. A three-tier service delivery system consisting of an array of placement options of special schools, special classes and LRC (with the LRC as the major initiative) to serve students with disabilities were grafted into Chinese educational system, resembling the continuum model adopted in the US. The three-tier service delivery model has been reaffirmed or specified in more detail in almost all laws and regulations regarding special education after 1990s. A specific document, Trial Measures of Implementing Learning in Regular Class- rooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities (Trial Measures; Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 1994) provided comprehensive regulation on the implementation and support of LRC programmes.

## **The Parallel Development of Special Education Schools and LRC**

**The Expansion of Special Education Schools and LRC** The institution of the new service model led to a steady expansion of special education provision to students with disabilities (Xiao, 2007). In 1980, there were only 292 special schools in China serving 33 055 students

who were blind and deaf (there were no formal schooling for students with intellectual disability till 1979). In 1992, the number increased to 1077 special schools, 1550 special classes with 129 400 students enrolled, which was four times the total numbers for the past 40 years, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (Gu, 1993). In 1992, there were 129 400 students with disabilities in school and 28% (36 558 students) of them were at general classrooms; however, in 2010, LRC programmes served approximately 60% of all students identified with disabilities (300 000) in regular schools (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2010).

When the full inclusive education advocacy seems to win the inclusive education debate in the Western and results in closing of many special schools, China has made efforts to develop special schools and LRC in a parallel manner. The Ninth Five-Year (1996–2000) Work Programme for Implementing Compulsory Education for Children with Disabilities (STATE COUNCIL, 1996) specified that at least one special school should be established in each city or county with a population of 300 000 or more, and LRC programmes should be expanded in a large scale meanwhile. The most recent policy document, Guidelines for Mid-term and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) (STATE COUNCIL, 2010) confirmed that this goal mapping special schools nationwide should be reached by 2020. Also, the Ministry of Education published the Project on Developing Special Schools in Mid-Western Areas of China in 2008 co-ordinated with National Development and Reform Commission of People's Republic of China. This project was implemented within 2 years to invest 5.45 billion RMB on establishing 465 new special schools and renovate 695 old ones, and purchase necessary teaching and rehabilitation equipments for them, in the Mid-Western areas of China which are commonly known as socio-economically less developed areas (National Development and Reform Commission of People's Republic of China, 2008). However, the situation of special classes has exactly been the opposite. The number of special classes increased rapidly in the 1990s and then dropped drastically during the new century. In 1979, 12 special classes attached to regular schools were opened for 137 students with intellectual disabilities in China, and the number of the classes reached 599 drastically in 1988 (Xu and Shi, 1990). About 6148 special classes were established in 1998 reaching the peak of expansion, but declined very fast to 684 in the year 2008 (China Education and Research Network, 2008). Many special classes were consequently closed and a few of them were transferred to resource classrooms for students with disabilities to study in regular schools. For example, Beijing developed 148 resource classrooms to support 5616 students with disabilities learning in 1091 regular schools by 2012 (Sun, 2013). Resource classrooms have been experimented in similar ways in other metropolitan cities as the major practice of developing support system for LRC.

Thus, special schools representing the most typical segregated special education services and LRC being widely acknowledged as the Chinese model of inclusive education, have been both emphasised and developed in China to form a so-called parallel special education system (Piao, 2004). There have seldom been any complaints or debates on special and regular education operating as a dual system or advocacy to close special schools as what happened in the West resulting from deinstitutionalisation movement (Jenkins, Pious and Jewell, 1990; Poon- Mcbrayer and Lian, 2002).

The Conflicts between Special and Regular Education The other major task of special schools is to constitute the 'backbone' of the local special education system by serving as resource centres to provide technical assistance to LRC programmes including disability identification, teacher training, consultation, professional guidance, quality supervision and so on (Xiao, 2007). However, special schools generally fail to play such roles due to the lack of resources and co-ordination between special and regular education systems (Sun, 2013). Regular schools focus on preparing able students for better performance in various examinations and very seldom view education for students with disabilities as one of their major responsibilities. Education for students with disabilities is just a very small part of regular schools' work agenda which can often be overlooked (Lei and Deng, 2007). The major complaints from regular schools are that professionals from special schools do not understand the routines of regular education and often present as a barrier instead of a facilitator for the actual teaching in regular classrooms (Piao, 2004). In fact, regular schools are more interested in dumping students who have disabilities and difficulties in learning and behaviour to special schools instead of co-ordinating with them to better serve students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Feng, 2010).

Traditionally, Chinese special schools imitate regular schools for school operation to provide a simplified version of regular education curricula for students with visual and hearing impairments as well as intellectual disability, supplemented with the use of Braille materials, sign language and object teaching materials (Ye and Piao, 1995). In recent years, special schools have followed regular schools to initiate 'new curriculum' reform as well to develop very different curriculum modules and design alternative textbooks for students with disabilities in order to be more professionalised. A model of combining medicine and education has been hotly discussed and put into practice nationwide. This has actually made special schools more professional and special for providing quality education and rehabilitation services to students with disabilities (Lu, 2013). However, the disparities between special and regular schools are enlarged as a matter of fact as special and regular schools operate in different models increasingly.

### **Dilemmas in Implementing LRC Model**

The implementation of LRC programmes has led to a quick increase in nationwide school enrolment of children with disabilities from 6% to 60% between 1987 and 1996 (STATE COUNCIL, 1996), and reached over 80% since 2000 according to the official statistics (Deng, 2003). The whole country hails LRC as the Chinese inclusive education which fulfils its unique socio-cultural conditions, and succeeds in making public education more accessible for children with disabilities (Deng and Zhu, 2007). However, the quality of LRC programmes has often been challenged by many researchers (e.g., Feng, 2010; Xiao, 2007) that students with disabilities have been just 'sitting' instead of 'learning' in regular classrooms. Two major dilemmas remain unresolved to hinder the quality of LRC programmes.

### **Care Versus Education.**

Learning in regular classrooms has been practised in a quite different cultural context from inclusive education in the West where Confucian ideology has served as the social foundation for centuries (Deng and Poon-McBrayer, 2004). The Confucian philosophy has created a hierarchic social structure that emphasises a stable social order and strong family ties, and

everyone should support the social order and behave in society according to his or her social status (Lee, 1995). Wide acceptance and equal treatment of disability has not been formed in the Chinese context (Yang and Wang, 1994; Ye and Piao, 1995). The recent Report to the Seventeenth and Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007 and 2012 advocated to 'care' and 'support' special education respectively as the most important policy statement on special education in the country (Tang, 2012). Obviously, these regulations still represent the strong impact of the traditional notions of welfare. The core values of inclusion such as equitable and appropriate education have not been emphasised in LRC programmes (Deng and Poon-McBrayer, 2004).

### **Exam-oriented Education Versus Education for All.**

One of the most challenging issues in China in educational reform has been the overreliance on examinations, which have been aimed at selecting elites and jeopardised the genuine development of creativity and personality of young people (OECD, 2011). The emphasis on examinations derived from the imperial examination system, which was designed to select the best officials for governing society by the imperial central authority and has survived from centuries to form a highly competitive education tradition of elitism in China (Feng, 1995).

Chinese central government was determined to carry out a new round of national 'new curriculum reform' in 1999, which aimed to replace repetitive and mechanistic rote-learning with innovative, participatory learning experiences (Feng, 2006). Efforts were even made to break the boundaries of the rigid 'National College Entrance Examination', and to provide diverse and flexible curricula to enhance communication between teachers and students and inspire students' creativity and learning interests (Jiang, 2009). However, the foundation of the extreme examination-orientation system has not been shaken at all. Thus, the outcome of 'new curriculum reform' has not turned out to be as positive as expected (Liu and Wu, 2006).

The needs of children with disabilities have often been neglected intentionally in mainstream classrooms and some would even have been sent home because teachers are concerned that they may disturb other students and take up teachers' time (Deng and Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Tang, 2012). In the year of 2012, 19 parents of students in Baocheng Elementary School in Shenzhen city signed their names jointly to reject a student with autism to remain in the school, which led to the drop-out of this child. However, this incident was reported in media and aroused the public discussion intensely (China News, 2012). Similar protests from parents of students without disabilities against enrolment of students with disabilities in regular classrooms happened in Beijing and many other cities as well in the past years (China News, 2012). However, the underlying reason is that the systematic shortage of expertise and support in regular classrooms has led to the problems in LRC programmes. A substantial research base (e.g., Salend, 2011; Villa and Thousand, 2000) indicates that the final responsibility for the success of inclusive education rests primarily with regular education teachers' willingness and ability to modify curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Also, inclusion depends largely on the availability of support and resources in the regular classroom and on the way teachers differentiate them between students (Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997). Professional support and services in regular classrooms are still very limited although advocacy to establish a

support system (e.g., resource classrooms, resource teachers) for LRC programmes has been strong recently.

## Conclusion

The inclusive education movement has led to the transformation from segregated education placement (e.g., residential institutions, special schools and classes) to more inclusive educational settings such as a continuum of service model and a single full-time general classroom placement for all students (Salend, 2011). However, beyond the inclusive rhetoric are controversial and problematic practices. The move towards inclusive education in China has been largely underpinned by its specific cultural values and conflicts between the pursuit of academic excellence and new goal of universalising basic education for all (Deng and Poon-Mcbrayer, 2012). The boundaries between special and regular schools are enlarged. On the one hand as they tend to develop as very different systems and on the other hand, the boundaries are blurred meanwhile as including children with disabilities into regular schools have evolved as a common practice and special schools try to be linked with regular schools by playing a supporting role.

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