Comparative Analysis of Autism Education Policies in Mainland China and Hong Kong

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Abstract. Autism, a complex neurodevelopmental disorder, is characterized by deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, repetitive and stereotypical behavior patterns and interests, and sensory sensitivities. Despite the increasing prevalence of autism, there is limited research on the education of children with autism. This study compares the autism education policies in Mainland China and Hong Kong based on field research conducted at the Shunde District Shangliao Children Rehabilitation Center and Aoi School. The findings reveal that although there have been improvements in the education of children with autism in Mainland China, there are still several deficiencies compared to Hong Kong, including limited educational opportunities, low integration with mainstream schools, and a shortage of qualified educators. Recommendations are provided to enhance the educational landscape for children with autism, including increasing educational opportunities, supporting the development of special education in mainstream schools, fostering collaboration between rehabilitation centers and mainstream schools, promoting inclusive education, and providing professional training for teachers. These suggestions aim to advance autism education policies in Mainland China.

Keywords: Autism Education Policies; Mainland China and Hong Kong; Comparative Analysis.

1. Introduction

Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that originates in early childhood. It is characterized by social skill deficits, including a lack of communication abilities (verbal or nonverbal), repetitive behavior patterns and interests, and sensory sensitivities [1]. In China, the "Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders" defines autism as a developmental disorder with varying degrees of impairment in interpersonal communication, narrow interests, and stereotyped behaviors [2]. Approximately 75% of children with autism also exhibit significant intellectual disability, while some demonstrate certain areas of higher learning abilities despite overall intellectual impairment. The prevalence of autism is increasing, possibly due to improved research and diagnostic tools that were previously lacking, resulting in many children with autism being misdiagnosed with intellectual disability [3]. Autism has a higher prevalence in boys, with a ratio of approximately 4 to 5 boys for every girl diagnosed [4]. Among children with autism, about 70% have intelligence within the normal range [5].

The diagnosis of autism is typically based on assessment tools such as the Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC), Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS), and Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CABRS). In addition to these scales, interview-based and observational research methods, such as the Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders, are used.

The key to intervention strategies for autism lies in special education training and behavioral interventions to improve cognitive abilities, social interaction, and adaptation in daily life. Current intervention approaches for autism mainly focus on behavioral interventions [6], language and communication interventions, social skills interventions, and physiological interventions. Behavioral interventions utilize the principles of classical conditioning to shape behaviors, analyzing the relationship between behavior and environment and modifying behavior through the assessment of target behaviors and environments. Language and communication interventions aim to improve communication skills and assist early-age children in communication through the use of pictures, computers, and other means. Social skills interventions involve activities primarily focused on play

behavior and peer interaction to train social skills in children with autism. Physiological interventions include sensory integration training, auditory integration training, and acupuncture, which stimulate the nervous system to elicit responses to sensory stimuli and promote the coordinated development of brain functions [7, 8]. These interventions have proven to be effective in improving language, social interaction, perception, and behavior.

2. Autism Rehabilitation Policies and Intervention Status in Shunde District

2.1. Policies related to children with autism in Shunde District

In 2012, Foshan City implemented the "Fifteen-Year Free Education Program for Disabled Children and Adolescents in Foshan City," which extended the scope of free assistance for disabled children with Foshan household registration to include high school education, covering a total of fifteen years, including compulsory education. Each disabled child receives an annual subsidy of 6,000 RMB.

In 2009, the district government issued the "Provisional Measures for Rehabilitation Subsidies for Disabled Children in Shunde District," which provides rehabilitation subsidies for children under 14 from low-income families and economically disadvantaged families. The annual subsidy ranges from a maximum of 30,120 RMB to a minimum of 15,600 RMB. The subsidy is used for rehabilitation treatments, training, and foster care. Comprehensive training programs can change the life trajectory of children.

In 2014, the Shunde District introduced the "Guangdong Province Special Education Improvement Plan," a comprehensive initiative aimed at advancing inclusive education. This plan is designed to ensure that every child with a disability has access to appropriate education and establishes clear assessment criteria. To safeguard educational rights, the plan enforces compulsory education for children diagnosed with autism and guarantees zero rejection. For students with mild disabilities, the plan bolsters the development of special education resource classrooms within mainstream schools, enforces barrier-free practices, and encourages the adoption of inclusive education. For children with moderate disabilities, the initiative involves expanding enrollment in special education schools, with a specific emphasis on creating opportunities for students with autism, thereby incrementally fulfilling the admission requirements of these students. In the case of children with severe disabilities, the plan commits to providing services such as home-based or remote education and integrates them into the broader student management system. This comprehensive approach reflects a commitment to inclusivity and the rights of all students to receive a suitable education.

2.2. Institutional Situation

In Shunde District, several autism rehabilitation institutions have been established in different locations, including Beijiao Kangyuan Center and Ronggui Ai Garden, which provide education and rehabilitation services for children with special learning needs. However, due to limited resources and financial constraints, these institutions face varying degrees of challenges. Parents of children with autism often experience higher levels of stress compared to parents of children with other types of disabilities. They are more prone to depression, marital crises, and social isolation, which can negatively impact their well-being [9]. The survey conducted among teachers in these rehabilitation and educational institutions for children with autism aims to raise awareness and attention to the needs of children with autism.

3. Autism Services in Hong Kong

The development of rehabilitation services in Hong Kong can be traced back to the early 1970s, spanning over 50 years. The "Rehabilitation Program for Hong Kong" published in 2005 led to the initiation of the Special School Autism Guidance and Teaching Pilot Program by the Hong Kong Education Bureau in 1983. The program was officially implemented in 1987 and provided support

for children with autism attending special schools. It has undergone revisions in 1992, 1995, and 2002 to meet the increasing educational needs of children with autism.

The Hong Kong government has established numerous institutions to provide assistance to children with autism. For example, there are eight Child Development Centers in Hong Kong, staffed by occupational therapists, optometrists, audiologists, etc., offering services such as registration, initial consultations, case analysis, professional assessments, referrals, and follow-up. The government has also established the Education Bureau Educational Psychology Service, which provides psychological and learning assessments. Additionally, special education centers have been set up with a collection of books, teaching materials, and computer software for teachers' reference and to provide a platform for special education professionals to share experiences.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Hong Kong provides special education for students with special needs, including children with autism. Since 1987, the "Autism Guidance and Teaching Program" has been implemented, with eligibility for the program determined by assessments conducted by professionals. Hong Kong currently has over 60 government-funded special schools. Children aged 6 and above can enjoy free basic education. Schools implementing the "Autism Guidance and Teaching Program" provide additional guidance teachers and enhance the counseling skills of teachers based on the advice of educational psychologists, among others. Special schools in Hong Kong organize classes based on the age groups of children with autism. Under the guidance of the Autism Guidance and Teaching Program, special schools not only provide classroom teaching but also offer intensive guidance to children with autism. Different modes of guidance, such as individual guidance, one-to-two guidance, group guidance, in-class support, and follow-up guidance, are provided based on the needs, learning progress, and teaching activities of children with autism, aiming to improve their regular learning, social interaction, and adaptive skills. A survey was conducted among teachers in these special schools for children with autism in Hong Kong, with the hope of drawing lessons from the Hong Kong experience and providing improvement suggestions for children's education in mainland China.

4. Research Findings

Field research was conducted at the Shunde District Shangliao Children Rehabilitation Center and Aoi School. The participants in the research were teachers from rehabilitation centers and special schools. The following are the main survey results:

4.1. Survey Results of Shunde District Shangliao Children Rehabilitation Center

The Shangliao Children Rehabilitation Center currently has 24 enrolled children. Although medical insurance does not support their educational expenses, there are specific subsidies provided by the Beijiao Town and Foshan City. The center has a total of 4 teachers, with 3 of them being female. According to the teachers, children receiving full-time primary school or kindergarten education account for only 30.0% of the total number of children with autism in the district. The majority of children receive rehabilitation training only in autism rehabilitation institutions. The teachers pointed out that many parents have attempted to enroll their children in regular education, but rejection is a common occurrence. Only 15.0% of the children are currently attending regular kindergartens or primary schools.

Regarding the professionalism of the teaching staff at the rehabilitation center, all teachers are required to undergo training provided by the Provincial Disabled Persons' Federation upon employment. Only after obtaining the qualification can they work independently. Additionally, various training sessions are conducted every year, and some teachers are sent for external learning opportunities. In addition to external training, case discussions are held monthly, and internal training is conducted quarterly. For different children, teachers use various teaching methods, such as structured teaching, tabletop teaching, PCI games, naturalistic teaching, floor time, and corner games. These methods are recognized in the industry as effective, and teachers receive training to learn and

implement them. The curriculum is generally focused on seven areas: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, cognition, communication and social interaction, social skills, activities of daily living, and sensory perception. Students with higher abilities can also attend transition programs. If the goals of the teaching plan are not achieved within three months, the teachers will adjust the plan, reassess the child's abilities, and set appropriate goals.

However, the rehabilitation center also faces challenges. The high cost of services places a heavy burden on families, resulting in many children with autism not being able to access treatment and education. Additionally, parents have concerns about rehabilitation training and education during primary school. Due to the lack of special classes and acceptance in many regular schools, children with autism spend most of their time at home. Some rehabilitation centers are located far away, posing transportation issues, and the lack of full-time education programs hinders social interaction opportunities for children with autism.

4.2. Survey Results of Aoi School in Hong Kong

The teachers at Aoi School summarized several key features of the school. First, there is a collaborative effort among professionals. The school has a team of professionals, including speech therapists and educational psychologists, to provide comprehensive education to students. The teachers undergo specialized training, such as intensive pre-service training. All new staff members are required to complete 240 hours of intensive pre-service training, which focuses on the application of behavior analysis for teaching children with autism. The training and pre-service introduction include lectures, case studies, role-playing, case observations, and practical courses closely supervised by course directors and consultants. Furthermore, all therapists are required to attend monthly training courses to enhance their knowledge and skills. The training combines theory and practice, including lectures, case studies, video recordings, assessments, and role-playing.

Second, there is strong collaboration between home and school. Parents and the school work together to apply the strategies taught in school to the home setting, which maximizes the effectiveness of training.

Moreover, the teachers pointed out that inclusive education has been introduced in regular schools in Hong Kong. Special classes, such as the "Integrated Education Class," have been established within schools to meet the learning needs of students. The Hong Kong government has established an inclusive education system to ensure that all students have the opportunity to fully participate in learning in mainstream schools. Schools are encouraged to adopt a "whole-school approach" to support students with special educational needs, including students with autism.

However, the teachers also highlighted some challenges in the special education services in Hong Kong. First, there is a significant financial burden. The substantial expenditure can cause financial pressure on the government, especially during economic downturns. Second, there are numerous social institutions, resulting in resource dispersion and overlapping services. For example, there may be two early education and training centers in one district, while another district may not have any centers at all. Third, teacher training struggles to meet the demands of service. Autism is a complex condition with various intervention strategies and methods, and general teacher training, including early childhood education, is insufficient to meet the needs of teaching students with autism. Most teachers receive on-the-job training, which increases their workload and may affect the quality of services for children with autism.

5. Discussion

Based on the research conducted, it is evident that while there have been improvements in the education of children with autism in Shunde District, Mainland China, there are still several areas of deficiency compared to Hong Kong. These areas include limited educational opportunities, low integration with mainstream schools, and a shortage of qualified educators. In light of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Firstly, the government should increase educational opportunities. Support should be provided to expand the enrollment capacity of special education schools in various regions, actively create conditions to admit children with autism, and strive to meet the educational needs of children with autism. Welfare institutions with the capacity can establish special education schools to benefit more children with autism and increase rehabilitation opportunities. Mainstream schools should be encouraged to establish resource classrooms, allowing children with autism to receive education in regular schools with the assistance of special education teachers, thereby ensuring equal educational opportunities. Encouragement should also be given to private initiatives to establish autism classrooms, aiming to cover every child in need.

Secondly, the government should support the development of special education in schools and enhance collaboration between rehabilitation centers and mainstream schools. As children with autism enter regular schools, their difficulties in teaching and learning arise due to their challenges in expressing emotions and differences in communication. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the collaboration between child rehabilitation centers and schools. Rehabilitation centers can provide support to schools and increase opportunities for the participation of children with autism in daily activities, enhancing teachers' understanding of each special needs student. Regular training on autism teaching methods should be conducted, ensuring that teachers have the necessary skills.

Furthermore, the government should promote inclusive education and establish resource classrooms. Inclusive education aims to create an environment where every student has the opportunity to fully participate in learning. It is essential to encourage schools to adopt a whole-school approach and support students with special educational needs, including those with autism. Resource classrooms can serve as a bridge between regular and special education, ensuring that students with autism have access to both regular andspecial education services and support.

Lastly, the government should enhance teacher training. Some regular schools do not have special education teachers, so it is crucial to strengthen teacher training by incorporating relevant special education courses into teacher education programs. This will enable regular school teachers to gain early awareness of autism and acquire the necessary teaching methods to accommodate students with autism, allowing schools to confidently enroll more students with autism. In addition, special education teachers must receive specialized training in teaching and training methods for children with autism to provide more personalized educational services.

6. Conclusion

This study has drawn comparisons between the educational policies for autism in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Despite improvements in the education of children with autism in Mainland China, there are prevalent shortcomings compared to Hong Kong. These include limited educational opportunities, insufficient integration with mainstream schools, and a lack of qualified educators. Therefore, we propose several recommendations to advance autism education policies in Mainland China.

Firstly, there is a need to expand educational opportunities for children with autism, providing them with more resources and environments conducive to learning. Secondly, we should support the development of special education within mainstream schools to promote greater integration of children with autism, thus enhancing their social skills and quality of life. Additionally, collaboration between rehabilitation centers and mainstream schools should be fostered, sharing resources and experiences to collectively improve the educational environment for children with autism. We also advocate for inclusive education, allowing children with autism to learn and grow in an accepting and understanding environment.

Lastly, professional training for teachers is essential to increase their understanding of autism and their ability to educate children with autism effectively. We believe that by adopting such measures, the experiences from Hong Kong can be effectively utilized to create a better educational environment for children with autism. However, it is crucial that each recommendation is adapted and tailored to

the specific circumstances of the Shunde District and Mainland China as a whole, to address the local needs and challenges.

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