The Ideal and the Reality: A Critical Analysis of Inclusive Education for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in China

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Abstract. In China, policy stipulating inclusive education for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is sharply at odds with the stark realities of its implementation. This paper argues the resulting discrepancy is no mere operational failure but a symptom of profound structural contradictions, a thesis it explores by situating China's 'learning in regular classrooms' (LRC) model within the context of global, rights-based norms. At the core of this disconnect lies a foundational schism in philosophy: China's pragmatic, access-driven tradition versus the West's rights-centric ideal. This philosophical divide precipitates a cascade of systemic issues, from a policy-practice fissure upon school entry and chronic deficits in resources and teacher training, to the friction of a 'parallel' school system whose very structure impedes, rather than facilitates, genuine integration. The paper therefore concludes not with simple remedies but with a call for foundational reform, arguing that for China to achieve authentic inclusion, it must undertake a paradigm shift in its special education ethos—moving decisively from a framework preoccupied with access to one fundamentally built on quality and individual rights.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Inclusive Education, Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC), Special Education, Policy-Practice Gap, Disability Studies.

1. Introduction

The international inclusive education movement is predicated upon the belief that education is a human right for all learners, and the vision is clearly stated in international treaties, including the 1994 UN Salamanca Statement and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [1]. These frameworks argue for a systemic shift to educational provision that is designed to accommodate the individual difference of all students. An essential requirement is an inclusive education system that values diversity as the norm, and provides every child with a high-quality, supportive learning environment. China, in reaction to this international phenomenon, formulated the Sui Ban Jiu Du or "learning in regular classrooms" (LRC) model as the main vehicle for educating children with disabilities in inclusive education settings, a concept first created in the late 1980s [2]. The program explicitly includes a range of disabilities, with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) being a late addition in 2011 [3].

Despite the great strides made in promoting access to education via the LRC model, a large, complex gap remains between the high ideal of an inclusive China as voiced in policy statements and the lives of children with ASD. Extension of the LRC framework to this population has also faced substantial barriers in practice, particularly since the system has been added on to meet the unique requirements of ASD without a systemic re-conceptualization of the framework or its application [4]. The fact that the system was first developed for other disabilities is a historical point that is important for considering the current issues. As a result, this disconnect has led to a longstanding policy-practice void that has been particularly frustrating for children with ASD who strive for a meaningful education.

This paper argues that the policy-practice gap is more than a failure of implementation; it is deeply embedded in structural, systemic and cultural issues. The examination of the chasm will reveal a stark conceptual separation driven by: philosophical tension with the global model of rights-based inclusive

education, the contradictions posed by a separate (or “parallel”) education system, inadequate resource and teacher development, and the widespread impact of social stigma that creates immense pressure for all involved. It argues that meaningful inclusion of children with ASD in China should be more than just policy tweaking: it should bring about a paradigm shift away from the current access-dominated and pragmatic approach to one that would put quality, equity and individual rights at the center of consideration.

2. The Philosophical and Historical Context of Inclusive Education in China

2.1. The Global Ideal of Authentic Inclusion

Inclusion is more than simply placing a student with a disability in a general education classroom. It is inherently tied to issues of equity and group membership and requires a more systemic approach to ensure that all students are contributing to and engaging fully in the life of the school. True inclusion requires that a personalized, needs-based curriculum is developed that meets the particular learning profile of the child. This is in stark contrast to inclusive practices, where a child is physically in a classroom but does not receive the crucial curricular adjustments, pedagogical adaptations, and social support needed to flourish [5]. The demand for genuine inclusion is reinforced by overwhelming evidence to its advantages. For children with ASD, studies have shown that being educated in inclusive environments results in improved social interaction, social flexibility, and self-esteem [6]. Peers interact more frequently and positively in inclusive settings, which engenders acceptance and offers rich opportunities to observe peers and learn through imitation critical social behaviors. Furthermore, evidence suggests that when students with disabilities are in inclusive settings, they perform better academically, and gain important adaptive skills required for their real-world success.

2.2. The Pragmatic Genesis of China's LRC Model

China's formal special education has changed dramatically since the Reform and Opening-up in the late 1970s, during which time key legislation was passed to make compulsory education the law of the land, while children who have disabilities were included in this provision [7]. It was within this time of streamlining that the LRC model developed. Crucially, it had more pragmatic than philosophical foundations. The model was first instantiated as a cost-efficient approach to dramatically increase school enrollment rates quickly and meet the stipulations of the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 [8]. Researchers have noted that the implementation of the LRC service delivery model prioritized as many children with disabilities being served in general schools as financially feasible with the “philosophy of scarcity” (i.e., personnel, limited fiscal resources, and facilities) more a driving factor than a sincere “commitment to the concept of mainstreaming”.

This pragmatic, access-based approach is a key distinction between the Chinese LRC model and Western rights-based inclusion. Whereas Western inclusion is founded in Liberal Democratic ideals of individualism, personal rights and equity, the LRC model was conceived as a pragmatic response to a national level access challenge. Quantity — not quality of education — was the focus: it was all about how many students were enrolled. This elementary difference is key to understanding why and how the system became challenged despite the fact it did not inherently involve the systemic changes crucial to actual inclusion (i.e.: individualized education programs (IEPs), and meaningful parent-school collaboration) [9, 10].

2.3. The Belated Recognition of ASD

Difficulties faced with the LRC model of education were subsequently compounded by delayed identification of ASD in the China special educational system. Although the term of ASD was firstly mentioned in the Chinese academic literature in 1982, it was for a long time ignored in the Chinese society and was not officially accepted in China as a disability until 2006 [11]. It was another five years before children with an ASD were officially recognized by the Ministry of Education as being eligible for LRC services in 2011 [4]. This chronology points to a major system breakdown. The LRC model was in place for nearly 25 years and its infrastructure and personnel had been trained to serve more traditionally recognizable disabilities. When ASD—a disorder with a constellation of social, communicative, and behavioral difficulties—was belatedly added to this existing system, there were no major overhauls. The system did not apply to those with autism, but these people were coerced into fitting in with a framework that did not have capacity to cater to them. Many of the problems we experience today are a legitimate result of this basic mismatch.

3. Systemic Barriers to Implementation

3.1. The Paradox of School Entry

The nearest focus for exclusion is usually at the school gates where the discrepancy between what is officially mandated and what actually happens results in an 'entry paradox' which excludes many children with ASD. While national policy defines LRC eligibility as a diagnosis of ASD, many local authorities and schools have implemented an informal but very clear criteria for placement: an IQ score of under 70 [12]. This practice effectively conflates the need for educational support with intellectual disability. As a result, students with ASD who have average or above average ability — who may be considered ideal candidates for integration — are often precluded from their opportunity to learn in LRC and to receive its supports. Teachers report that their main concern is a student's functional impairment, but the system coming to depend on an IQ score leaves out many a candidate who needs help.

This is compounded by the strong social stigma associated with the official categorization of ASD as being under “mental disability” (jīngshén cánjí). In China, this is an extremely negative term of stigma, so that parents are afraid that their children will be stigmatized for the rest of their life. This places parents in a painful dilemma either obtaining the formal diagnosis needed to get LRC services but risking the lifelong “label” or choosing instead to do without that help rather than allowing their child to experience social discrimination. This parent avoidance scenario leads to a procedural impasse, where teachers cannot initiate LRC procedure if the parents do not refer, leaving teachers in what they describe as a "never ending fight" whilst the child receives no formal support. Moreover, the application of LRC, for example, is so time-consuming and unrewarding that it effectively bars the teachers from participation. The teachers all say the paperwork is "unrealistic" and the financial subsidy for taking an LRC child is so minimal it offers no meaningful incentive for the significant additional effort required [13].

3.2. Deficiencies in Educational Resources

Impediments to inclusion are fundamentally systemic issues in the distribution of critical resources, both human and curricular. Perhaps the biggest obstacle, however, is the huge shortage of well-trained teachers. The vast majority of generalist teachers in China have not been prepared for teaching children with ASD as one study found 82.18% of teachers reported that they had never been trained in special education at all [14]. It is this knowledge gap that is a major cause of children with ASD being excluded or banned when their difficult behavior can no longer be tolerated. A key study in 2016 showed that although the majority of preschool teachers had sufficient knowledge of general child development, only 17% were able to respond with the correct answer about Autism and not a single person could identify evidence-based interventions [15].

In theory, resource classrooms should be a base that is specialized in whole school, but in practice, it is often not. The problem is that there are not enough qualified resource teachers. Schools usually employ a mainstream teacher to be responsible for the room part-time and invariably not educated in the area. It is then that the resource room often becomes a “hollow” room where the prescribed, focusing, and individualizing help fails to materialize [14]. China’s hyper-standardized “one-size-fits-all” curriculum only makes this worse. However, the current specialized teaching resources and pedagogical strategies are extremely limited, and there is a lack of guidelines for the adaptation of a rigid curriculum for diverse abilities of students with ASD; also, these strategies emphasize academic knowledge, not the functional abilities in life. These pedagogical challenges are compounded by structural conditions, in particular massive class sizes and the tremendous pressures of an examination-obsessed education system, which present strong disincentives for teachers to invest the time and energy needed to care for special needs students [16].

3.3. Stakeholder Conflicts and Societal Pressures

Policy and resource systemic deficiencies make for a tenuous and often adversarial deal for those on the front line. These educators are trapped between the state's directive to carry on inclusive education and the lack of sufficient training and resources to carry out this task effectively. They are influenced by parents of "normal" children who complain about a handicapped child who disturbs their child’s class. The inability to control these undesirable conditions has led educators to high levels of stress and burnout [17]. Meanwhile parents of children with ASD find themselves in a world of fear and frustration, all too frequently being made to carry the weight of ongoing support. A common alternative is when schools compel parents to accompany children in class or hire private “shadow teacher” as a personal tutor [18].

The proliferation of the “shadow teacher” represents a deep failure in public education, creating this effective privatization of what should be accommodations provided with an organization, and a public funded/managed organization at that. The high cost of employing a teacher of this kind has created a new, market-based disparity, where genuine inclusion is only available to those who can afford it. This is further aggravated by significant societal hesitation. For many parents of non-disabled children, inclusive education is seen as unfair, with the children with disabilities described as incomplete or less capable and becoming isolated [19].

4. Discussion: Analysis of the Policy-Practice Chasm

4.1. Rights-Based vs. Pragmatic Models of Inclusion

The root conflict of the difficulties of inclusive education in China is the contradiction between the two entirely opposite paradigms. The worldwide movement for inclusive education is based on the concept of the rights of the child in general, and in particular that people should be included. In contrast, China's LRC model took practicality as the starting point, starting from the state goal of realizing universal compulsory education "in a more economical and expedited way" at the state level. The emphasis has been on expanding the quantity — the sheer volume of students with disabilities in schools — to satisfy national policy goals. This action, reflective of a collectivist society, considers the education of people with disabilities not as a right of an individual but as an obligation of the state. And the practical implications of this philosophical difference are vast. In a human rights model of education the system is supposed to respond to the child. On the contrary, in the pragmatic model of China the child is demanded to prove that they "can sit quietly and learn well" (a situationist possibility) in order to fit into the current system. This “quantity before quality” culture explains the continued lack of investment in the substance that makes inclusion matter [20].

4.2. The Contradiction of a "Parallel System"

The intellectual issues are compounded by educationally a misunderstanding about education that is fundamentally paradoxical. China purposefully has created a "parallel system" for special education that takes axial segregating special schools as the "backbone" and LRCs in ordinary schools as the "main body". Although the double track system sounds thorough, it is contrary in nature to the notion of a single integrated comprehensive structure. Such an organization creates an inherent institutional separation that enforces segregation and confusion.

This double system leads to a number of pathogenic consequences. First, it creates systemic incoordination. In principle, special schools are supposed to act as ‘resource centers’ for mainstream schools, but this support is perceived to be weak owing to lack of facilities and coordination. Second, the separate specialized system means that mainstream schools can conveniently sigh with relief. Faced with the standards of an exam-driven system, typical schools invariably emphasize dumping disabled students...special schools” rather than the promotion of inclusive provision. This abnegation of responsibility is legitimized by the parallel system. Lastly, once special schools improve, they face the danger of becoming further marginalized than they already are in the mainstream sector, as the dichotomy between the two tracks further expands, and the categorical assumption that ‘special’ pupils require ‘special’ placements becomes more entrenched, thus threatening the essence of inclusion [16, 21].

5. Recommendations

Bridging the so-called gap between policy and practice requires nothing less than holistic system change that goes beyond incrementalism. Let’s begin with the most crucial step: Legal change. It is here that we need to see the identification of an independent educational category for ASD introduced to remove stigma, for the introduction of national guidelines that are legally enforceable to remove unwritten barriers such as IQ thresholds, and for targeted resourcing to transform 'free and inclusive' from an unfunded mandate into a well-resourced reality.

Second, a heavy commitment to human capital is required. Mandatory practical inclusive education training is required of all teachers and a separate corps of expert resource teachers will be needed to keep school resource rooms operational. This needs to be accompanied by a flexible national curriculum, and a vision about assessment that is about more than just content.

Finally, this structural amendment should complement the development of a cultural shift to promote inclusion nationwide through anti-stigma campaigns and the empowerment of schools to work in true, collaborative partnerships with parents.

6. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the challenging as well as paradoxical territory of inclusive education for children with ASD in China. It confirms that while the country’s LRC policy has broadened access to education, in the substantial gap between policy rhetoric and practical realities there has been very little ‘inclusion’. This inequality is upheld by a number of intertwined reasons: a problematic means of entry, constant shortages in resources and teacher training, and the root structural paradox of a “parallel” education system. At base, the problem is that China’s pragmatic, access-focused model fundamentally conflicts with the global rights-based ideal.

To fill this gap, this paper has suggested a package of focused measures for systemic reform across policy, human capital, resources, and culture. The road to real inclusion is long and hard without a doubt. But it requires more than new directives and more than some new money; it requires a fundamental restructuring — a shift away from a system that focuses on enrolling students and toward one that focuses on the quality of each child’s educational experience, and from a model in which the child must prove his worth to the system to one in which the system must prove its worth to every

child. Ensuring the rights and development of every child with autism is not merely an educational policy issue, but a reflection of a society's commitment to equality and justice for all its members.

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