

Research on the Teachers' Dilemma in Inclusive Education under the Background of Learning in Regular Classrooms

Yat Nga Lam^{1,a,*}

¹*Boston University, Boston, 02215, HJ2093766, USA*

a. mistylam2002@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Inclusive education has been a crucial education revolution since 1994 the *Salamanca Statement*, proclaiming that children with diversified abilities should have access to regular schools with appropriate scaffolds and support. Chinese inclusive education is presented as Learning in Regular Classrooms where children with special needs are placed in a regular classroom of a regular school. This article explored and identified challenges LRC faces through teachers' roles, standards, and relationships with the children's families that lead to unsuccessful LRC. The lack of special education knowledge in teachers, mono-teaching-evaluation standards on academics, and disagreements between teachers and families on support for children are some causes of unsuccessful LRC. This article proposed multiple solutions according to the challenges which include cooperating with special education schools to provide systemized special education training and support for teachers, schools providing clear, written, and diversified teaching standards, increase in communication between teachers and children's families, and schools providing extra support for children.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC), Special education

1. Introduction

In 1994, the World Conference on Special Needs Education officially proposed the concept of inclusive education, which became the main principle of the *Salamanca Statement*. The *Salamanca Statement* proclaimed that every child, no matter their abilities and learning needs, has the right to pursue education, and the education system should accommodate and take into account the wide diversity of characteristics and needs of children [1]. The concept of individualized and equitable education is an international education revolution. Under the influence of this education movement, the Chinese education system was altered respectively. The form of inclusive classroom is presented as Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC), where children with special needs who are evaluated as 'educatable' are placed in regular classrooms. In 2019, there were three hundred ninety thousand five hundred children with special needs placed in LRC, which was a 104.45% increase from 2013 [2]. However, previous research on LRC indicates that it has not been successful in effectively supporting their academics and exploring their potential, with a common phenomenon of children with special needs in LRC being "placed in classrooms", rather than "striving in classrooms" [3, 4]. In such a situation, children with special needs would need to adapt to the school rather than school-altering

standards to meet the needs of children. Multiple barriers in LRC are inhibiting children with special needs in LRC to reach their full potential and success, with high dropout rates.

Through retrieving and analyzing relevant literature and references, this paper puts forward the reasons hindering the development of LRC in the Chinese education system by analyzing the alteration in teachers' roles, teacher evaluation standards, and the relationship between LRC teachers and families.

2. Related policy

Education policy documents, *The Second Phase of Special Education Enhancement Programme 2017-2019*, *Modernization of Chinese education 2035*, and the '*14th Five-Year*' *Special Education Development and Promotion Action Plan*, have the goal of strongly promoting and expanding LRC into the current education system, promoting an inclusive, equitable, and justice society [5,6,7,8]. As LRC is increasingly applied in different schools, the slow-developing policies and modifications are hindering the application of LRC. The lack of detailed and specific regulations and instructions such as evaluation standards, teacher training, and the classification of LRC leads to no standards or laws for children with special needs, teachers, and schools to rely on [2]. The lack of solid measures and guidelines creates difficulties in implementing the policies in reality and prevents effective LRC progress.

3. Transitioning of teacher's roles

LRCs are prone to be classified as a category of special education rather than normal education in practice or policy [2]. LRC is commonly seen in special education documents such as *The Second Phase of Special Education Enhancement Programme 2017-2019* and the '*14th Five-Year*' *Special Education Development and Promotion Action Plan*[5,7]. This brings the culture of education of children with special needs in LRC is the responsibility of special education teachers and schools rather than teachers in regular schools. Teachers often view having a child with special needs in their classroom as an extra job as they view themselves as serving the majority, not the minority [2]. The Chinese education culture believes that children with special needs should attend and benefit from special education schools, while "regular" schools are designed for "regular" children. Many teachers tend to prioritize support for the "regular" children while children with special needs come last. The common phenomenon is that children with special needs in LRC do not receive enough support to achieve academic success. Teachers then believe that LRCs are not suitable for children with special needs and, therefore, would provide even less support for them, suggesting that children with special needs should study in special education schools. The belief that children with special needs cannot strive in inclusive classrooms deepens.

Special education courses are not mandatory courses in teacher training, leading to many teachers having very limited information about special education policy and professionalism in special education which becomes an obstacle to the development of LRC [2]. Very few LRC classroom teachers receive systemized special needs education [9]. The fact that teachers view LRC as extra work and not their responsibility signifies that they are unfamiliar with the concept of inclusion. In *the Second Phase of the Special Education Enhancement Programme 2017-2019* and the '*14th Five-Year*' *Special Education Development and Promotion Action Plan* sets a goal to include special education as a requirement course in Normal Universities and provide teacher training for all teachers through attending professional training organized by education administrative department and passing the exam by 2020 [5,7]. However, the 2022 interview of teachers in LRC stated that they still feel incapable of supporting the children with special needs in their classrooms [2], which suggested that the training and courses are either not provided or not supportive enough. Teachers still try their

best to offer help and education for children with special needs through self-learning. However, the resources and knowledge gained are limited. Teachers often feel pressured, worried, and unconfident to teach as they are not certain of the needs and teaching methods for children with special needs. The teachers are worried that their unprofessionalism would bring negative consequences to the child with special needs. Therefore, chose not to act, leading to children with special needs being unattended. The teachers face the dilemma of wanting to teach but do not have the ability to teach, and children with special needs are not striving in LRC [2].

4. Teacher's mono-evaluation standards

The mono standards in evaluating the ability of educators is also a default. In the Chinese education system, children are assessed mainly through their academic performances, and therefore teachers are often rated by their ability to bring high academic achievement to classes. When a child with special needs is placed in a classroom, it puts a lot of pressure on the teacher as they have to maintain high average classroom scores. Academics often appear more difficult to children with special needs as they have not received appropriate modification and scaffolds, therefore their academic scores are often lower than average [2]. The lack of professional knowledge about special education leads teachers to believe in stereotypes such as relating low IQ scores with children with special needs and are less likely to succeed, therefore teachers provide less expectation and support for children with special needs [10]. Although the *'14th Five-Year' Special Education Development and Promotion Action Plan* stated providing “appropriate skews and modification in the teacher evaluation system” for LRC teachers [7,11], the modification has not been specifically defined with standards, where in practice, teachers are still evaluated based on same standards, which is children's academic scores. This mono-evaluation standard system does not consider the diversified effort and abilities that LRC teachers put into their classrooms[2]. Teachers are not encouraged to put effort into creating an inclusive LRC classroom for children with special needs.

5. Relationship between teacher and children's family

Family plays a crucial role in their child's education and development. Strong bonds and connections between caregivers of children with special needs and school teachers should be actively enhanced for a better understanding of the child holistically to assist and create an individualized modification for the child's education. However, collaboration tends to be challenging due to various reasons.

On a general base, Chinese school teachers have high expectations of caregivers assisting their children's academics outside of school including supervising children's homework, tutoring, corrections, dictations, and even projects to ensure that the child understands the school's teachings. Difficulties arise when the expectations from teachers and caregivers contradict. As teachers perceive themselves as serving the majority, they require children with special needs to catch up with the school's teaching outside of school, while some caregivers believe it is the teacher's responsibility [2]. These contradictions lead to the inability to create continuous education in and out of school, which inhibits the best performances for children. Interviews the teachers claimed that caregivers with children with special needs are less involved, to an insufficient extent, do not communicate enough with schools and do not attend school activities, which hugely hinders progress [2]. Studies show that caregivers with children with special needs experience higher psychological distress as they are more likely to deal with overall family changes, prolonged stress from handling children's daily life problems, and financial strain from children's fluctuating health conditions [12,13]. In some cases, caregivers of children with special needs have a disability or are in a lower SES, whereas some teachers see this as a challenge. Caregivers of children with special needs do experience less amount of time and resources to support their child academically outside of schools, where the teacher is

demanding more support from caregivers outside of school [2]. The inability to strengthen and support teachings for children with special needs outside of school makes it difficult for the children to catch on with courses in school as Chinese teachers rely on caregivers to support a large amount of academic work outside of school.

Another challenge and contradiction that families and teachers face is the matter of disability ID. Multiple types of research reflected that many caregivers deny the fact that their child has a disability and refuse to have their child get scanned [2]. However, a child with special needs can only receive appropriate support if they are legally diagnosed. As some children with special needs do not have legal documents of disability ID, they cannot receive the support needed, which is unfair to them and schools. This is especially crucial for the teacher because of their heavy workloads, which do not allow them to provide enough support to the child with special needs. Also, if the child does not have a legal disability ID, their grades have to be graded into the classroom average score, which in most cases, lowers the class average scores as the child with special needs does not receive enough aids and scaffolds for them to strive. The classroom average scores hugely affect the teacher's career as they are evaluated mainly based on that. Therefore, it leads to teachers having negative emotions toward children with special needs but without disability ID. On the other hand, if the child receives disability ID, their scores do not have to be counted into the class average score. In such a situation, some teachers do not care or worry if the child with special needs understands the content as their result no longer affects the teacher's career. The legal document of disability ID is double-edged. It acts as a protective shield for the teacher's career and helps children with special needs be welcomed and accepted into the classroom by their teachers. However, in reality, it also acts as an excuse for the responsibility of supporting children with special needs. Therefore, teachers and caregivers take different stances, which prevents providing appropriate support and positive relationships for children with special needs to learn [2].

6. Suggestions

Aligning with the goal of the *Salamanca Statement* proclaimed that every child, no matter their abilities and learning needs, has the right to pursue education, and the education system should accommodate and take into account the wide diversity of characteristics and needs of children [1], the Chinese current LRC should also modify to meet these goals and create solutions to the challenges.

6.1. Suggestion on transitioning of teacher's roles

One of the challenges was that educators lacked systemized special education knowledge, which disabled them from supporting children with special needs in appropriate ways. A solution to this situation is to cooperate with special education schools or organizations [2]. Special education schools have more professional knowledge and resources that can better support children with special needs. Inviting special education professionals to discuss individualized plans for specific children placed in the LRC with teachers would be a great guidance for teachers. Special education schools could also design systemized training for educators to gain sufficient knowledge about special needs to better support children. The training should include teaching educators how to create IEPs, help understand children's behaviors, laws about children with special needs, and most importantly the concepts of inclusion and that all students have potential and could succeed in unique ways if given the right support. It is the responsibility of teachers to remove barriers for all children to succeed. This is crucial as it will break the broadly believed concept that children with special needs are less likely to succeed, and should go to special education schools, therefore providing less support. Teacher training can help break this concept and create an inclusive society by proving to the community that everyone is able to succeed in their own ways if given appropriate support.

6.2. Suggestions on teachers' mono-evaluation standards

The mono-standards of evaluating the teacher's ability mainly through children's academic scores do not effectively recognize the work teachers have done to create an inclusive classroom and the support given to the child with special needs in LRC. The unstandardized and unwritten "modified" evaluation standards do not provide solid support for teachers to rely on. Schools should set clear, written, and diversified evaluation standards for teachers in LRC. Teachers would not only understand what to do to support the children with special needs, but more importantly, their effort and work would be recognized and valued, which would build positive attitudes in LRC .

6.3. Suggestions for creating a positive relationship between teachers and children's families

The contradicting concepts and lack of communication between teachers and children's caregivers lead to an inability to fully support a continuous learning environment for children in and out of school. It is crucial for both sides to understand that their teachings and opinions are valued. Constant communication should be done to reach agreements, avoid misunderstandings, and effectively discuss the progress of the children in and out of school to set appropriate goals for the children. When teachers are transparent about their support for the child and when caregivers are involved in setting the goals, not only would the goal be more appropriate for the child as it considers the child's ability and needs holistically, but also the caregiver would be more active as the goals were what they agreed on. Schools should provide an environment and technology that allows effective communication and flexibility in structuring children's goals.

Communication also allows teachers to explain professionally and convey correct information to caregivers to understand the importance and the support that could be provided if their child has been issued the disability ID. Many caregivers are influenced by the social concept of viewing the disability ID as being unsuccessful and therefore refuse to issue the disability ID leading to teachers being unable to provide the help that the child needs. Communication and explanation to the caregivers can help caregivers understand details and reasons for issuing the disability ID which could benefit the child and help teachers effectively work.

Another problem that occurs is the inability of caregivers to provide academic support for their child with special needs outside of school. Teachers must understand that it is their responsibility to support the children and listen to the caregiver's opinions. Due to various reasons, sometimes caregivers are not able to provide the support that the teacher requires. It is vital to have the school to chime in and support. In situations where teacher believes extra tutoring after school would benefit the child, schools should create after-school programs to support children.

7. Conclusion

The current LRC has met various challenges, rooting failure into children with special needs in LRC, further deepening the discrimination towards children with special needs, which opposes the goal of inclusion classrooms. The challenges that lead to an unsuccessful LRC include a lack of special education training for teachers, a mainly academically based teacher evaluation system, and a lack of communication and agreements between teachers and children's families. Systematized teacher training from special education schools with inclusive education concepts, teacher evaluation standards that can reflect their work and effort in building an inclusive environment and support for children with different abilities, and an increase in positive and respectful communication that diminishes misunderstandings and fosters cooperation between teachers and caregivers of children with special need with school's support are suggestions to a better LRC experience. This literature review-based research paper might omit some crucial factors that impact LRC. Further research on

LRC, especially on successful LRC, could reflect more inclusive perspectives and provide further insights into creating a better LRC environment. To conclude, this paper offers some insights into the factors that hinder effective LRC and sheds light on creating a more effective LRC environment for all children to strive for.

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