

LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA WITHIN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CONTEXT

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To realise educational equality and construct a harmonious society, many scholars have valued and promoted inclusive education in China. More and more scholarly works are being devoted to this topic, forming three main types of studies: basic theories, commentary on foreign countries' experiences, and application of the principles. Given specific circumstances in China, researchers have created a form of inclusive education, which bears Chinese characteristics, that is learning in regular classes (LRC). In addition, a number of related policies were created to help with the effective implementation of this special form of inclusive education. Literacy education is an important field for the practice of inclusive education and has been implemented mainly in the form of LRC. There has been great improvement in inclusive literacy education in China. However, various challenges have also arisen: The idea of inclusive education is yet to be accepted widely; the relevant laws and policies are to be further improved; and the number of qualified teachers and overall educational quality are yet to be boosted. In future, there should be more empirical studies and sufficient supporting systems related to inclusive literacy education. It is also hoped that the form of LRC used in inclusive literacy education will be upgraded to a higher level of inclusive education, which integrates general education with special education more seamlessly.

Keywords: inclusive education; learning in regular class (LRC); literacy education; special education; general education

INTRODUCTION

Since *The Salamanca Statement* (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization & Spain Ministry of Education and Science, 1994) called for inclusion in education, the idea of inclusive education has spread all over the world. It has become an important force in education, which greatly influences educational theory and practice. In mainland China, the developmental path of inclusive education is similar to that in many western countries, but there are also unique features within the Chinese context. This article will analyse current situations of inclusive education in China with a special focus on literacy education, due to the importance of literacy education for an individual's lifelong development and success. Both research and practice in this field will be reviewed. In this section, we will define 'inclusive education', 'literacy', and 'inclusive literacy education' first, and then introduce a background of inclusive education in China, followed by research questions and methods for the current review study.

Just as in other countries, there is no unanimous definition of 'inclusive education' in China. Different scholars have somewhat distinct perspectives of true inclusive education. Huang's

description is well known: 'Inclusive education is a new educational idea and process which accepts all students, opposes discrimination and exclusion, promotes positive engagement, emphasises team cooperation, and satisfies different needs'(Huang, 2003: 30). This definition has been widely cited by Chinese scholars and can be regarded as the most representative understanding of inclusive education in China.

The meaning of 'literacy' also changes over time. In western society, 'literacy' traditionally means the capacity to read and write, and to apply these skills to real life situations appropriately. As the society progresses, the meaning of literacy becomes more complex. For example, Zhang (2011) argues that literacy includes four aspects: information literacy, visual literacy, multicultural literacy and media literacy. We define literacy in this article as an integrated ability of an individual to use the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to properly express him-/herself, and to communicate and share what has been gained, with the outside world. The educational activities to improve such abilities can be viewed as practice of 'literacy education'. When such practice is guided by the principles of inclusive education, it then becomes 'inclusive literacy education'.

The current ideology in China is helpful in facilitating inclusive education. In China, 'building a harmonious socialist society' has become an important goal after it was proposed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2006. Such a society is 'a democratic society under the rule of law, a society based on equity and justice, an honest and caring society, a society full of vigor, and a stable and orderly society in which humans live in harmony with nature' (Xinhua News Agency, 2006). The goal of 'equity and justice' is consistent with that of inclusive education, which requires the reduction of exclusion, increase in diversity, and provision of equal opportunities in the society.

The realisation of social justice relies largely upon educational justice. However, various forms of educational inequality and exclusion in China have hindered the realisation of social justice. First, in China, people with disabilities are less likely to get suitable education compared to able-bodied people. Special education in China was often separated from general education until the late 1980s, when people with disabilities were officially given the option to attend mainstream schools. However, nowadays, students with disabilities may still be treated unequally even after they have successfully entered mainstream schools. On the other hand, there is explicit or implicit discrimination or inequality even within regular education itself. In the context of exam-oriented education in China, students' academic achievement has become almost the only criterion to assess their performance. Those who do poorly in academic work are not regarded as individuals with special needs, rather, they are labeled as 'bad students' by some of the teachers. Such students are disliked by teachers, excluded by classmates, and may gradually become marginalised. In some extreme cases, the school may prevent the 'bad students' from taking tests in order to increase the admission rate of higher-level schools. Therefore, the principles of inclusive education may provide an important theoretical basis for the accomplishment of educational justice and equality at both special and mainstream schools. It has become an increasingly discussed topic in China in terms of how inclusive education may help bridge the gap between general and special education and promote all children's holistic development. The

principles of inclusive education have been applied to various educational fields, and literacy education is one of them.

This article focuses attention on the progress in both research and practice of inclusive education in mainland China, with an emphasis on the practice of inclusive literacy education. In particular, we will address the following questions:

1. What is the progress in research related to inclusive literacy education in China?
2. In practice, how does the Chinese government ensure the implementation of inclusive literacy education and what are the researchers' perspectives on this?
3. What are the challenges during the implementation of inclusive literacy education?
4. What are the possible ways to address the challenges?

We searched relevant literature, which was primarily from the 'China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database'. The keywords include 'inclusive education', 'learning in regular class (LRC)', and 'literacy education'. There are two forms of translation for inclusive education: '全纳教育' & '融合教育'. The two forms of translation are somewhat interchangeable, so both of the two words were used as key words in literacy search to reach more related research articles. 'Learning in regular class' represents the basic form of inclusive education in China, so there are quite a lot of meaningful studies with this keyword. Regarding the sequence of literature search, the two translation forms of 'inclusive education' and 'learning in regular class (LRC)' were searched separately first, then each of them were searched together with "literacy education" to find most relevant literature for inclusive literacy education. Articles written by well-known scholars and from high-impact journals were included to guide this review. Through this method, we hoped to gather most representative and influential literature to guide this review.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROGRESS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CHINA

The number of published articles is an important indicator to showcase the trend of research on inclusive education. Zhao (2013) found that there were only nine articles about inclusive education published in China between 1990 and 2000. Using 'inclusive education' as the key word to search articles in the 'China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database' for each of the two-year periods from 2000 to 2013 shows a substantial increase in the publications (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of articles related to inclusive education.

Year	2000-2001	2002-2003	2004-2005	2006-2007	2008-2009	2010-2011	2012-2013
Number	29	96	171	221	375	370	466

In terms of the types of journal, most of the articles were published in special education journals. These data also suggest firstly, that special education scholars are more likely to pay attention to inclusive education than researchers of general education; and secondly, general education

journals do not tend to publish articles related to inclusive education. Therefore, the integration of general and inclusive education needs to be further improved. In addition, most published articles related to inclusive education seem to appear in low impact journals, which implies that many such articles may not have exerted a significant impact on theory and/or practice.

Types of research on inclusive education

Generally, there are three types of studies related to inclusive education in China. The first one is basic theoretical research. This type of research focuses on related theories and models of inclusive education, and involves thorough analysis of a certain topic. For instance, Huang (2010) proposed that the basic idea of inclusive education is educational equality, and that the implementation of inclusive education in general schools paves the way for educational equality and social harmony. Deng and Liu (2013) paid attention to the social cultural characteristics of inclusive education and issues related to adaptation for local needs.

The second type of research is reviews of inclusive education in foreign countries. This type accounts for a large proportion of all inclusive education studies in China. Searching 'inclusive education' in the Chinese thesis/dissertation database yielded the following results: Among 42 master's theses related to inclusive education, 14 are review articles. In addition, the only dissertation with 'inclusive education' in the title has to do with analysis of related experiences and practice in western countries. For example, Huang (2001) introduced the practice of inclusive education in Spain, and summarised relevant features and experiences. Xu, Sun and Lei (2010) analysed the development of inclusive education in Australia and its implication for China. Chao (2014) analysed the current situation of inclusive education in South Africa including principles and goals, implementation strategies and issues to be solved.

The third type is related to the application of the principles of inclusive education to various specific educational areas. Inclusive literacy education belongs to this category. These studies do not necessarily focus on children with disabilities, but children with various distinctive needs can also be the targets. The abundance of such studies means that the impact of inclusive education has not been limited to special education, but also general education. For instance, from the perspective of inclusive education, Li (2009) conducted a thorough analysis of education-related issues for migrant workers' children. Wei & Ji (2013) discussed the role of gender in children's education according to the principle of inclusive education. Some researchers have applied the principle of inclusive education to literacy education. For example, Lei and Deng (2007) analysed inclusive educational models for children with hearing impairment and proposed several instructional models on auditory language, lip reading, sign language, and comprehensive language education.

PRACTICE OF INCLUSIVE LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA

The practice of learning in regular classes

The main form of practicing inclusive education in China is learning in regular classes (LRC), which Gan (2013) described as accommodating children with special needs in regular schools

and classes and letting them study with other children. A more official definition included in the *'Trial Measures on Implementation of Learning in Regular Class for Disabled Children'* defines LRC as 'arranging children who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally retarded or with other special needs but who have some competency in the nearest general schools, and letting them study and participate in activities with other general students'.

The form of LRC is quite similar to 'return to the mainstream' in Western countries, but they still have many differences, especially at the early developmental stages of LRC. Piao (2004) identifies some differences between the two: for example, the main goal of the former is to improve the enforcement of compulsory education, but the focus of the latter is equal access to education and human rights. The former involves the class adviser and subject teachers' particular attention on special needs children before, during and after class, but the latter has qualified staff and appropriate facilities which typically involve assistant teachers, tutors and special classrooms. The origin of LRC is also very different from that of western inclusive education, as the former lacks a theoretical basis of inclusive education. Xiao (2005) explains that originally, the main reason for establishing the policy of LRC in China was to ensure disabled children's schooling in a short time period, due to the lack of special schools. As the idea of inclusive education spread more widely, it influenced the research and practice of LRC to a large extent. Nowadays, LRC and inclusive education overlap a lot in their principles and propositions. Nonetheless, the two are not strictly equal. In general, inclusive education in China has not yet fully developed and there is still much to be done to achieve the goal of more essential inclusive education.

Various laws, regulations and policies have been created in order to promote good practice of inclusive education, and the development of inclusive education in China relies largely on their progress and enforcement. As early as the 1950s, disabled children began to study in general schools in some regions of China. In the early 1980s there was a regulation stating that most children with intellectual disabilities should be enrolled in general primary schools. However, it was not until December 1987 that the term 'LRC' was first proposed in an announcement issued by the Ministry of Education entitled *Announcement on the Release of 'Educational Plan of the Full-Time School (Class) for the Mentally Retarded' (Exposure Draft)*. This was a remarkable event as thereafter LRC was formally supported by the Chinese government. In 1988, LRC became one of the country's main policies. The policy document *'Trial Measures on Implementation of Learning in Regular Class for Disabled Children'* in 1994 further promoted the practice of LRC in China. The 1994 document sets systematic and comprehensive regulations on LRC regarding the target, qualification for admission, requirement on instruction, training for teachers, parents-related work, educational administration and so on, and has become one of the principal guiding documents for the implementation of LRC in China. Subsequently, various conferences were held to discuss the theory and practice related to LRC, and more relevant laws, regulations and policies were established. In 2010, the *'Outline of the National Medium- to Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)'* describes special education in a whole chapter, emphasising that schools should expand the scale of LRC. This is uncommon among educational planning programmes in China. Table 2 lists some major policies regarding inclusive education in China.

Nowadays, special education is provided in both special schools/classes and general schools (i.e. LRC). Hua (2003) argues that the implementation of LRC has changed special education from isolated to a more integrated and diverse status, and has increased the public's understanding of disabled children as well as special education, which helps promote social progress. At the end of 2010, there were 425,600 students who were offered special education, among whom 60.99% were learning in regular classes (Beijing Special Education Center, 2013). Therefore, most students who receive special education have been those who learn in regular classes.

Table 2: Major policies regarding inclusive education in China

Policy-Making Agency	Year	Title	Main Content
Ministry of Education	1987	Educational Plan of the Full-Time School (Class) for the Mentally Retarded (Exposure Draft)	Raises the concept of LRC for the first time, emphasising that slightly mentally retarded children should be admitted to the nearest school.
National Development and Reform Commission et al.	1988	China Five-year Work Program for People with Disability (1988-1992)	Developing special schools and promoting LRC.
Ministry of Education et al.	1989	Some Suggestions on Developing Special Education	Blind children who know braille can learn in regular classes.
State Council	1994	Ordinance on Education for the Disabled	The disabled people can accept compulsory education through LRC.
Ministry of Education		Trial Measures on Implementation of Learning in Regular Class for Disabled Children	Establishes LRC as the main form for disabled children to complete compulsory education, and stipulates comprehensive regulations related to LRC such as the target, admission, and teacher qualifications.
Ministry of Education Division of Basic Education, China Disabled Persons' Federation Division of Education and Employment	2003	Meeting Summary of National LRC Work Experience Conference	LRC has played a significant role in popularising education for the disabled individuals.
The National People's Congress Standing Committee	2006	Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (Revised)	General schools must accept disabled children of school age, and will be penalised according to the law if violated.
The National People's Congress Standing Committee	2008	Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Disabled (Revised)	From preschool to higher education, disabled children and youth have the right to attend general schools.
Ministry of Education	2010	Outline of the National Medium- to Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)	Expanding the scope of LRC.

Literacy education practice within the LRC context

Overall, there are not many empirical studies focusing on inclusive literacy education. The existing studies are mostly those describing personal experiences rather than empirical investigations. In addition, the existing research reveals the following two limitations. Firstly, most studies focus on children with hearing disorders or speech impairments instead of children with ordinary literacy learning difficulty, which is emphasised by inclusive education. Secondly, researchers usually pay more attention to ways of effectively improving the language skills of children with hearing or speech impairment in the context of LRC, rather than solving other literacy-related challenges. In other words, while the practice of LRC for literacy education considers the idea of inclusive education, it is still somehow a type of traditional special education.

Three types of practice-related research illustrate the current practice of inclusive literacy education in China. The first type focuses on the reform of general literacy education, which is influenced by the principles of inclusive education. For example, Cai (2013) emphasises the importance of interaction to improve the language skills of children with hearing disorders: In the LRC classrooms, the teacher should encourage the children with hearing impairments to talk and interact with others. Ji (2015) proposes a dual-module system, which integrates a preschool programme with language rehabilitation training courses for children with hearing impairments. She argues that the dual-module system is the basic system for inclusive education, and the choice of the most suitable curriculum should be individualised, based on the child's age, degree of hearing loss and the language developmental level. This kind of reform is also reflected in the area of classroom teaching. For instance, when teaching students with language deficiency, teachers are advised to use different strategies for them compared to other students. This can include using synonyms to teach new words, providing clear explanations of words with special meanings, and avoiding the use of 'filling in the blanks' type of questions to make them easy to answer.

The second type has to do with the unique value of inclusive education in improving the literacy levels of children with hearing loss. For example, Liao (2009) conducted a case study, which followed the progress and situation of a preschool child who learned in a regular class. Liao (2009) found that inclusive education had a positive impact on children's recovery process, due to increased opportunities to listen, speak, speech imitation and exercise, and abilities to adjust their language practice based on specific situations when interacting with other children.

The third type deals with quality assurance for children learning in regular classes. This kind of research is relatively uncommon. In order for the children with hearing impairments to learn effectively within the regular class, there should be some mechanism of quality assurance. A study by Zhang, Su, and Lei (2009) showed that the following elements are essential to achieve a good quality of LRC education for hearing-impaired children: systematic language rehabilitation training before admission to LRC, parents' active involvement, teachers' high skill levels in special education, adequate classroom resources, and children's own individual efforts.

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA

Although there has been impressive progress across China in inclusive education in recent decades, the full implementation of the principles of inclusive education is yet to be realised. Several factors have impeded the ideal development of inclusive education in China. The following aspects are among the most salient ones.

Insufficient advocacy of the idea

Although several years have passed since the introduction of inclusive education and the practice of LRC in China, the idea of inclusive education has not been widely recognised. Deng (2004) points out that the public in China are still not able to fully accept disabled people's educational and other equality rights. In addition, although the form of LRC is similar to inclusive education in western countries, the principles of equity, personalisation, and diversity have not been emphasised enough in China. Yan (2009) surveyed 300 parents of preschool children in Beijing, and found that many parents were not positive about children with special needs being enrolled in their own children's classes, because they viewed it as detrimental to both disabled and other children. On the other hand, they tended to be more supportive of sending disabled students to special schools. Therefore, due to various restrictions, the inclusive literacy education, just as other types of inclusive education, is primarily applied to children in special schools in China, rather than children with various learning needs in mainstream schools. This limitation on the scope of inclusive education showed that it is yet to be further extended to a more comprehensive level.

Inadequate laws and policies

Various laws and policies have been enacted related to LRC in China. However, they are not always able to satisfy the practical needs of inclusive education. Firstly, except for LRC, there has not been a law or policy directly related to inclusive education, and it was not until 2013 that the phrase 'inclusive education' appeared in the official government document. As mentioned earlier, LRC does not equal inclusive education. There is a gap between these two. The laws and policies created within the scope of LRC do not fully represent the true value of inclusive education. Secondly, the existing laws and policies have various limitations. Liu (2007) summarised the issues as follows: The degree of legal authority is low, the level of arbitrariness of law enforcement is high, and there is a lack of regulations regarding the following: qualifications of the practitioners, resource provision, the maximum class size of LRC, and the evaluation of students' academic performance. Thirdly, the implementation of the laws and policies is sometimes difficult. Currently the top-down model is used regarding the creation and enforcement of related laws and policies. In practice, however, policies from the central government are not always strictly followed and enforced, which makes some policies an ideal rather than reality. Lastly, current laws and policies are mainly concerned with macro level matters such as the entitlement of admission for children with special needs, rather than specific details in education such as the qualification for teachers engaging in inclusive literacy education.

Lack of qualified teachers for inclusive literacy education

Since the emergence of LRC, the lack of adequate qualified teachers has become one of major difficulties that impede the development of inclusive education in China. This also applies to the area of literacy education. Zhu (2009) found that in some primary and secondary schools in China, many teachers had little knowledge about inclusive education and were unwilling to accept children with special needs to study in regular classes. Yan (2008) surveyed 160 preschool teachers in Beijing and found that nearly half of the teachers had never encountered disabled children in their workplace, indicating insufficient readiness for inclusive education. Ma and Tan (2010) conducted a survey of some LRC teachers in Shanghai and found that there was inadequate training for teachers on the topic of special education, and teachers had difficulty in understanding disabled students' educational needs and mentoring them both in and after class. Therefore, despite being two of the most developed cities in China, Beijing and Shanghai still have a long way to go to increase the number of qualified teachers for inclusive education. It is reasonable to imagine that the situation may be worse in the more rural areas.

There are several reasons related to the lack of qualified teachers. Firstly, under the current pre-service training system in China for prospective teachers, usually there is little emphasis on inclusive education. On the one hand, the current pre-service teacher training is mainly aimed at general education and there are very few institutions that are capable of providing high-quality training for potential special education teachers. Moreover, among those providing general pre-service teacher training, the institutions may not emphasise the idea of inclusive education, or there are few faculty members able to teach related courses. As a result, as Wang and Wang (2009) mentioned, prospective teachers trained for general education have little practice related to inclusive education even if they have some knowledge about it. Generally, there are only a small number of teachers who have knowledge about inclusive education, not to mention the number of teachers who have expertise in a specific area of inclusive education such as literacy education. Liao (2009) pointed out that current teachers working on young children's hearing rehabilitation are mainly general kindergarten teachers without expertise in language and speech training. Secondly, the in-service teacher training programmes often pay little attention to inclusive education. Some teachers of literacy education have never received inclusive education training, others may have received poor-quality training lacking systematic planning and fail to solve problems in the real-world. Lastly, there is no certification or licensing system in place for teachers of inclusive literacy education, which may negatively impact such teachers' professional competency and development.

Inadequate quality of inclusive literacy education

Whereas there has been a large number of children with hearing/speech impairment who are accepted in regular schools and classes, the quality of LRC is not high enough. Several factors may contribute to this. First, as mentioned above, many teachers of literacy education do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to deal with special needs in their classrooms. Second, because of insufficient funding, there are not enough necessary facilities for special needs students. Third, due to the large number of students in each classroom, it is a big challenge for teachers to pay adequate attention to every student with special needs. Fourth, under the influence of the

exam-oriented educational culture in China, academic performance is a major criterion to assess students, teachers and schools. Children with special needs usually have more difficulties in learning and may not perform as well as other students, which may gradually become marginalised or even ignored. In summary, many factors may contribute to practices that deviate from the original idea of LRC, making LRC like sitting in regular classes in some cases instead of learning in regular classes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA

Given the current situation of inclusive literacy education in China as mentioned above, several limitations need to be addressed to advance it further. More high-quality empirical studies, improved supportive social environments, together with people's increased understanding of LRC, are essential to achieve a higher level of inclusive literacy education. These three aspects are briefly discussed below.

First, there should be more empirical studies regarding inclusive literacy education. Currently, articles related to inclusive education are mostly theoretical rather than empirical. For example, Li and Deng (2010) did a literature search in 'China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database' and found that only 91 out of 298 articles related to LRC were empirical studies, and there were even fewer high-quality empirical research articles. Although LRC has been implemented for many years, there have not been widely accepted theoretical models and evidence-based systematic practical guidance in China. More empirical studies are needed to test theoretical hypotheses and develop evidence-based practical strategies that are suitable in the mainland Chinese context. In addition, there are very few empirical studies on literacy education within an inclusive education context, which can hardly satisfy both theoretical and practical needs. After the wider spread of inclusive education, more attention should be given to specific areas of inclusive education such as how teachers can best support children with language learning difficulties in regular classes.

Second, the support system of inclusive literacy education should be improved. Relevant laws and policies should be made clearer and more feasible, and regulations should be established regarding required funding, equipment, staffing, and construction of resource classrooms for inclusive education. In addition, the training for qualified teachers of inclusive literacy education should be enhanced and a licensing system should be formed. As Li (2014) proposes, systematic training related to inclusive education should be implemented for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Furthermore, the principles of inclusive education should be accepted more widely, especially the parents of school-aged children. For example, Gan (2010) has suggested that parent-school and home-school cooperation may be useful forms to facilitate parents' understanding and acceptance of inclusive education. Peng (2010) has called for empowering parents to engage them more in inclusive education.

Third, LRC should be progressed to true inclusive education and the quality of inclusive education should be improved further. Currently, the goal of inclusive literacy education is to satisfy educational needs for children with hearing and speech impairments. Xiao (2005) points out that LRC could serve children with different kinds of special needs and provide more

individualised education for these children. Therefore, in future, the target should be more diverse to include children with various language learning needs. In addition, as a preliminary form of inclusive education, LRC should be developed further in terms of both quantity and quality. It is hoped that the boundary between general and special education will fading, and the goal of adequate inclusive education will eventually come true in China.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided some preliminary answers to four questions posed in the introduction. As mentioned above, more and more researchers are paying attention to inclusive education, but there is still a lack of sufficient studies on inclusive literacy education. LRC is the main form of inclusive education in China and various laws/regulations/policies have been established to ensure the implementation of LRC. However, the principles of inclusive education have not yet been accepted widely; the relevant policies are yet to reflect more about the idea of true inclusive education; and the quality of inclusive literacy education is not of a sufficiently high standard. In future, there should be more empirical studies and more solid support systems related to inclusive literacy education. In addition, LRC should be upgraded to true inclusive education, which integrates general education with special education more seamlessly.

We hope that our overview will bring this important matter to the attention of researchers. Inclusive education is still at the beginning stage in China, so the challenges are not limited to the area of literacy education. From promoting the idea to the concrete implementation, there is still a long way to go for improving inclusive education in China.

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