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# Chinese Cultural Factors Impacting the Educational Schooling of Children with Autism in China

## Acknowledgements

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Karen S. Budd, Department of Psychology

# Chinese Cultural Factors Impacting the Educational Schooling of Children with Autism in China

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**ABSTRACT** In China, an insufficiency of schooling opportunities exists among Chinese children with autism. Schooling can be perceived as a viable treatment option that uses communication techniques. The current study sought to provide culturally informed recommendations for enhancing the schooling opportunities of children with autism in China. Qualitative analysis of seven interviews discussing Chinese cultural factors which impact the schooling opportunities of children with autism resulted in the generation of six themes: 1) a lack of individual attention in general education schools, 2) a deficiency in special education schools, 3) an insufficiency of specialized teacher training, 4) a loss of mianzi which affects school enrollment decisions and stigmatization, 5) a lack of autism awareness, and 6) parental commitment and grandparental commitment. The findings suggest that Chinese cultural factors may influence the schooling opportunities of children with autism in China.

## INTRODUCTION

In China, the term “gu du zheng” or “zi bi zheng” translates into “the loneliness disease,” otherwise known as “autism” in the United States. According to statistical reports, more than one million individuals in China have autism (Junmian, 2011). As stated in the diagnostic criteria of autistic disorder in the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders and Diagnostic Criteria, Third Edition (CCMD-3), the core characteristics of autistic disorder, a neurological disorder, include qualitative impairments in social interaction and communication, restricted interest, stereotyped and repetitive activities, resistance to change in environment and lifestyle, and the onset is usually prior to three years of age (Chinese Society of Psychiatry, 2002).

Limited schooling opportunities exist in China for children with autism, despite the fact that the school experience benefits children with autism because it provides them with opportunities to engage in interpersonal communication (McCabe, 2007). According to Rubin’s (2000) report, Tian Huiping established the first Autism Institute in China in 1993 after she found no school willing to enroll her son with autism. The scarcity of schooling opportunities available for children with autism in China reduces the likelihood of receiving early intervention treatment.

## GENERAL EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Currently there is no public school system in China that serves children with autism (Yue, 2010). General education schools contain large class sizes, which increases the likelihood of children with autism being rejected from general education schools, as children with autism require more individualized attention from

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teachers (McCabe, 2007). Teachers working in general education schools lack teacher assistants who could provide individualized attention (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). In addition to general education schools, there is an insufficiency of special education schools in China, primarily due to the shortage of special education teachers. Chinese educational programs train less than 100 special education teachers annually in a population of 1.3 billion people (Johnson, 2008).

#### CULTURAL FACTORS: IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL SCHOOLING

McCabe's (2007, 2008) previous qualitative studies with parents of children with autism in China indicated that cultural factors may impact the treatment of Chinese children with autism. The concept of "mianzi" in Chinese culture corresponds to the honor, and prestige that a member holds, achieved through life success or ascribed by community members (Peters & Forlin, 2011). The reason parents of children with autism experience a loss of mianzi corresponds to the importance of conformity in Chinese culture, in which children with autism display behaviors that deviate from the norm. The cultural value of mianzi may impact parental decisions toward enrolling children with autism in school. An insufficiency of research has addressed whether mianzi serves to significantly impact the schooling of children with autism.

The value of mianzi within Chinese culture may lead to an increase in the stigmatization of children with autism and their parents. Stigmatization is viewed as a social phenomenon where a group possesses characteristics that are perceived negatively by others (Tsang, Tam, Chan, & Cheung, 2003). Pertaining to children with autism, this would include stereotypical features such as social and communication impairments (Ling et al., 2010). There has been insufficient research assessing whether stigmatization serves to significantly impact the schooling opportunities specifically for children with autism in China.

As a result of the insufficiency of schooling opportunities available to children with autism in China, parents of children with autism often have become the only teachers for their child (McCabe, 2007). Such high parental commitment may reflect the positive cultural value placed upon children. Research has yet to assess whether other family members play a prominent role in impacting the schooling opportunities of Chinese children with autism.

#### CURRENT ANALYSIS: PURPOSE

The current study sought to further explore Chinese cultural factors that have impacted the schooling opportunities of Chinese children with autism. This study differs from McCabe's (2007, 2008) previous studies by interviewing university students and autism professionals rather than parents on their perspectives on the current educational system in China. The study goal was to provide a basis for culturally informed recommendations for enhancing the schooling opportunities of children with autism in China.

### METHODS

#### PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from a convenience sample of seven Chinese participants, 71.43% female and 28.57% male, with an average age of 23.86 years ( $SD=4.42$ ), residing in metropolitan cities in China. All participants were moderately fluent in English and agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. The sample included three undergraduate university students, two graduate students specializing in clinical psychology, a leading researcher specializing in autism in China and an owner of a current autism institute in China. The study was conducted as part of a university-based study abroad trip from a Midwestern U.S. university with opportunities to arrange interviews with local Chinese adults.

#### MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

The study used a semistructured interview created by the author to assess cultural factors impacting the schooling of children with autism in China. After obtaining

identifying information on participants' demographic characteristics, the interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions. One sample question asked: "What current perception exists concerning autism?" (See Table 1 for interview questions). Data were collected at the schools where student participants attended. Additionally, the author visited an autism institute to interview the founder and a university to interview a leading researcher specializing in autism. Most participants were interviewed individually and responded to questions in English; however, the founder of an autism institute spoke Cantonese; therefore, a Chinese student who was moderately fluent in English served as an interpreter. Participants were informed that their names would not be used in reports of the study. Interviews averaged 40 minutes in length and were transcribed by the author. Codes and subsequent themes were generated utilizing the constant comparative method, which consists of the following stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, combining categories and their properties, and formulating a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This study was based on general research questions and no specific codes were developed beforehand. The interview questions guided the interview and codes were developed from the data. Categorizing the codes (participant statements), allowed for the generation of concepts, resulting in key themes.

### RESULTS

Thematic analyses were conducted to assess cultural factors relating to the educational opportunities of children with autism in China. New themes were added to the final analysis when indicated by a majority of participants. Six themes were revealed: General Education Schools: Lack of Individual Attention; Special Education: Deficiency; Teacher Training: Generalized; Mianzi and Stigmatization; Parental Lack of Awareness and the Impact of Doctors; Parental Commitment, and Grandparental Commitment.

General Education Schools: Lack of Individual Attention  
A significant school rejection rate of children with

autism was identified by all participants. Participant 1 posited, "Children with autism are often not admitted to general education schools because parents of typically developing children enrolled at those schools speak of less attention being paid to their typically developing child." Pertaining to a lack of individualized attention, Participant 4 stated, "General education schools are only focused on the smart students; children with autism receive no specialized attention from teachers."

#### SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS: DEFICIENCY

An insufficiency of special education schools was reported by all participants. Participant 4 stated, "Rural areas especially lack special education schools, where often children with autism remain in a little room at home." Additionally, a majority of participants deemed that parents of children with autism often do not send their child to a special education school due to the wide-ranging conditions of school-age children at such schools. Participant 5 remarked, "Special education schools cater to many special children from Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to behavioral disorders."

#### TEACHER TRAINING: GENERALIZED

All participants reported the need for more specialized teacher training in China due to the low school acceptance rate of children with autism. Participant 6 reported, "There is currently a lack of specialized training that exists for teachers, therefore, negatively impacting the schooling opportunities of children with autism." Participant 7 further explained a need for additional specialized training: "Many teachers do not know how to open the mind of a child with autism."

#### MIANZI AND STIGMATIZATION

All participants indicated that parents of children with autism experience a loss of mianzi due to their child's loneliness disease, which directly affects their schooling opportunities. Participant 2 stated, "Chinese people often compare children; therefore, parents of a child with autism choose to not tell others that their child has

autism for fear of losing mianzi, which can directly impact parents trying to enroll their child in school.” Participant 7 further indicated, “Parents of Chinese children with autism won’t dare tell others their child has autism.” An additional theme expressed by all participants was stigmatization of children with autism. Participant 1 remarked: “There is a stigma or negative perception that exists concerning autism. Children with autism are perceived as significantly different by community members and teachers; however, society fails to see their willingness to connect.”

#### PARENTAL LACK OF AWARENESS AND THE IMPACT OF DOCTORS

As expressed by six participants, a lack of autism awareness exists among parents. Participant 2 indicated, “At first, many parents of children with autism believe their child’s condition is one similar to having the flu—it can be cured; therefore, intervention treatment (schooling) is delayed.” Participant 5 explained, “Parents are uninformed of the necessary techniques needed to effectively care for a child with autism—they do not know what autism is.” All participants also indicated doctors’ lack of awareness of autism, specifically in remote locations. Participant 6 stated, “There are currently not many experienced doctors, primarily in rural areas, who are aware of the loneliness disease, which further delays diagnosis and treatment.”

#### PARENTAL COMMITMENT AND GRANDPARENTAL COMMITMENT

All participants indicated that parents of children with autism display high levels of commitment in the face of high rates of school rejection. Parents who have a child with a developmental disability are allowed to have more than one child (One Child Policy guidelines); however, as indicated by Participant 3, “The parents of a child with autism will choose not to have another child but rather spend all their effort and put all their love into their child with autism.” A final theme, Grandparental Commitment, in which grandparents play an influential role in the education of Chinese children with autism,

was expressed by five participants. Participant 3 stated, “More than 80 percent of parents work; therefore, grandparents often take responsibility in the schooling of Chinese children with autism.”

#### DISCUSSION

The current findings revealed that children with autism have difficulty enrolling in school due to cultural factors such as mianzi, stigmatization, a lack of autism awareness, a deficiency in specialized teacher training, and an insufficiency in special education schools. General education schools often fail to serve children with autism due to a lack of individualized attention. Despite these challenges, parental and grandparental commitment remains high.

The current findings add to McCabe’s (2007, 2008) research in relation to parental lack of awareness of autism and highlights the high level of grandparental commitment. A deficiency in autism information disseminated to parents of children with autism delays early intervention treatment. Parents of children with autism in China are uninformed of what autism is and the necessary techniques and skills that should be implemented. The additional theme of grandparental commitment revealed that grandparents are playing an influential role in the education of children with autism, as both parents are often employed. The significance of their role and their participation in training programs has not been evaluated.

The findings of the current study reveal the need for more initiatives toward improving the schooling of children with autism in China. Potential avenues for improving the educational schooling of children with autism include increasing specialized training for teachers to ensure they have developed the necessary skills to effectively serve children with autism. Funding for transportation should be allocated to children with autism who live far from their school. Focus groups should be conducted among parents of children with autism addressing how to improve the current state of specialized schooling.

Paraprofessionals or assistant teachers should be in general education classrooms in order to offer more individualized attention to children with autism. Due to high parental and grandparental commitment, support groups should be implemented as a means to establish a strong network where valuable autism information can be discussed in addition to emotional support. Finally, educational programs should be offered to increase the awareness and acceptance of autism.

In considering the present findings, limitations of the study must be addressed. First, no pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions for comprehension. Also, while conducting the interview, the interviewer spoke English, which was not the participants' native language. The notes collected from the interviews were not reviewed by participants to ensure validation of content. The sample (n=7) consisted of a convenience sample with the participants possessing varying autism knowledge. Lastly, some of the interview questions were not neutral in their content. Future directions concerning the current study would be to evaluate the theme of grandparental commitment and assess mianzi and parental commitment by interviewing parents of children with autism.

The current study suggests that Chinese cultural factors may influence the schooling opportunities of children with autism in China. To fail to cater to the needs of children with autism reduces the likelihood of behavioral and social improvements. The publication of the reform proposals of the Education Commission in China indicated, "We will not give up on any student" (as cited in Peters & Forlin, 2010, p. 87). It is hoped that institutions in China will begin to put these words into action.

TABLE 1

AUTISM: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	
1.	What current perception exists concerning autism?
2.	What factors contribute to the current stigmatization of Chinese children with autism in China?
3.	Are parents blamed for having a child with autism? Why are parents, specifically, the mothers of Chinese children with autism stigmatized?
4.	In what ways can stigmatization be reduced?
5.	Is there a lack of knowledge that exists concerning what autism is? What is contributing to the current lack of knowledge?
6.	How can the awareness of autism be increased?
7.	Currently children with autism in China can attend general education schools. Do you find general education schools to be effective for this population of youth?
8.	Are special education schools meeting the needs of children with autism in China? How can special education schools better meet the needs of children with autism?
9.	What factors may contribute to the lack of schooling opportunities for this population of youth?
10.	Why are children with autism in China often not accepted to schools?
11.	How does a "loss of mianzi" impact the parents of children with autism in China?
12.	In what ways does the one-child policy impact parental commitment towards children with autism in China?

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