

Making sense of policy development of inclusive education for children with disabilities in China

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Abstract

Inclusion is integral to the education policy in countries across the world. In China, inclusion has been reaffirmed in recent policies as a priority in enhancing educational quality for disabled children. However, the growing scale of special schools and the increasing number of students enrolled seem to convey a conflicting message with inclusion. This paper critically examines the policy development from 1987 to 2023 concerning education for disabled children in China to make clearer sense of China's inclusion agenda. The analysis highlights a policy vision where special schools are seen as key resources to enhance inclusive provisions and will continue to grow in scale in the short term as they transform to be an integral and inter-connected part within the wider education system rather than segregated settings, while Learning in Regular Classrooms and inclusion remain a primary objective and rationale underpinning the educational development for disabled children. This means a broader understanding of special education/schools in China is needed. The Chinese government has forged and embraced a unique, if not controversial approach that is adapted to suit the local contexts. This may set an example for the global community to explore localised strategies for inclusion to enhance education for all.

Keywords

special education, Chinese special schools, disabled children, inclusion, learning in regular classrooms

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Introduction

Children with a recognised disability in China may have limited access to mainstream provisions or have their access to formal education altogether denied (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2014). Disadvantaged children in educational exclusion are at risk of further social exclusion when they become adults. Their double disadvantages raise concerns for social justice, equality, and children's rights. As a response, inclusion has increasingly become a global theme in education (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 1990, 1994, 2015), aiming to promote all children's equal right to a relevant, effective, and quality education. Inclusion/inclusive education cannot be defined in a single unitary way (Norwich, 2008; Slee, 2006). Broadly, inclusion concerns all learners as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education" (UNESCO, 2005, 13). This highlights that inclusion identifies and removes "all forms of oppression" and promotes "inclusion, equity and the celebration of difference with dignity" as fundamental values in society (Barton & Armstrong, 1999, 7). Narrowly, inclusive education originates from the field of special needs education (Armstrong et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2014). It means "all students being educated where they would be educated if they did not have a disability with necessary supports provided to students, educators, and families so that all can be successful" (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2006, 4). It promotes accessible mainstream education for disabled children with meaningful participation in learning, celebrating learner diversity, and ensuring educational equity (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Hornby, 2015).

Inclusive education for disabled children is integral to education policy across the globe. For example, England maintains that if parents wish and it does not affect the efficient learning of other children, all children should be educated in mainstream schools (DfE, 1981, p. 2001/2014; Parliament of UK, 1996, 2010). In the United States of America (USA), inclusive education is required by law in the form of the Least Restricted Environment (IDEA, 2004). In South Africa, the education system incorporates an inclusion framework guided by national policies (Department of Education of South Africa, 2001a; 2011b). In Japan, Special Needs Education in mainstream schools was legally implemented since 2007 (Government of Japan, 2007; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology, 2012). In China, Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) was established as a national policy since 1994, but inclusion has only recently been unequivocally affirmed as a priority in developing special education (MoE, 2017a; State Council, 2022).

However, despite the global inclusion agenda, children with disabilities today may remain in segregated provisions or have access denied to formal education. For example, in the United Kingdom, the percentage of pupils with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan¹ (389,171 pupils in 2023) attending special schools has increased from 38.2% in 2010 to 47.3% in 2023 (DfE, 2011, 2023). China has also seen a similar trend, where an increasing number of special schools has been built every year with a growing number of students enrolled: in 1999, 371,625 students were enrolled in 1,520 special schools; and in 2022, 918,500 students were enrolled in 2,314 special schools (NBS, 2000, 2023). This is more than the population of countries such as Bhutan and Luxemburg (World Bank, 2023). Thus, China's global commitment to the inclusion agenda (UNESCO, 1990, 1994; 2015) and its actual growing scale of special education provisions seems to convey a rather conflicting message regarding where the country is heading with its inclusive education agenda.

Thus, it is essential to understand more deeply the policy development regarding inclusive education for disabled children in China to make clearer sense of the direction of the country's inclusion agenda. This paper critically examines this policy development process from 1987 to 2023, which the author has characterised into three key stages based on her analysis below – pre

2014, between 2014–2020, and post 2020, as each of these stages is marked by milestone policy advancements, signalling a distinctive development focus for the period. The first stage tentatively explores the local practice of Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) as a viable inclusive provision; considering the initial issues as well as success, the second stage offers clearer support and targets for enhancing the education quality for disabled children; the third stage provides a blueprint and a development model towards greater inclusion and high quality educational provisions for disabled children. The following sections begin with the first stage of policy development pre 2014.

Pre 2014: Learning in regular classrooms

The term ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC)’ (随班就读, sui ban jiu du, follow/with, class, to, read/study, meaning that a student studies in a class alongside others) first appeared in government documents in 1987 (MoE, 1987) soon after compulsory education had become a legal requirement (NPC, 1986/2015). It was stated that there has been a considerable number of children with a mild intellectual disability enrolled in regular schools in the past years, and such practices have had beneficial results in terms of improving social interactions between children with and without disabilities; local education authorities (LEAs) should support and improve this form of LRC and consider it as a good example for many more regular schools to follow (MoE, 1987). LRC was mentioned twice in paragraph two in the context where it was recognised by the government as an officially acceptable form within compulsory education. It seems to be more of a bottom-up approach of an official recognition of what has been practically in place for years, instead of a top-down innovative reform actively addressing educational segregation and inequality. Nonetheless, this document has legitimised the practice of LRC and provided a foundation for further development of inclusive education in China.

After establishing that by law “the state protects disabled persons’ right to education” (NPC, 1990/2017, Article 18), the first clear framework for developing special education was established in 1991: “LRC and special units attached to regular schools are the main body and special schools are the backbone” (State Council, 1991). This means that inclusion was not prioritised and that special schools were equally encouraged. Specific and systematic instructions, legal enforcement, financial support, and accountability mechanism were also not in place to guide further development of inclusion (Chang, 2014). Such an ambiguous framework, however, was supported by scholars (Chen, 2014; Piao, 2009), who highlight that expanding the scale of special education may help to swiftly increase the enrolment of disabled children in formal education, which can be seen as a step toward achieving universal primary education. However, without taking into account the quality of services or the broader social implications, this effort may appear superficial and misleading. It detracts attention from what inclusion means onto mere enrolment rate calculation. It directs a fallacy of ‘not as bad as’ – children with disabilities whose needs are not met in schools are not as bad as those who did not have access to any formal education, and therefore concerns about the quality of provisions can be dismissed when facing the urgency to increase the quantity of placements. After all, a pressing concern at that time was the mass scale of disabled children who did not have access to any formal education at all – by 1995, only an average of 60% of disabled children (including hearing, visual, and learning disabilities only) had access to formal education (State Council, 1996). Nevertheless, the policy directions outlined above still indicate a heightened awareness within the government of a need to address the educational requirement of children with disabilities.

In 1994, the on-going practice of LRC became a national policy (MoE, 1994). LRC was deemed as beneficial and a main form of compulsory education for children with disabilities. The policy specifically requires that regular schools are responsible for catering for the needs of

children with disabilities; schools cannot refuse entry of children with disabilities who are considered able to study on an LRC placement; and assessments of these children should orient towards improving their confidence and can be different from their non-disabled peers (*ibid.*). However, this document was over-generalising without offering systematic approaches. It does not provide specific support for the local schools as to how they could take on such responsibility administratively, financially, and professionally. Nor does it specify any sufficient accountability mechanism to ensure the wider implementation of LRC. The question of 'who are considered as able to study on an LCR placement' was undefined, and decisions often depended on the goodwill of individual headteachers. The assessment arrangements for children with an LRC status may also be reduced to simply exempting them from exams.

In short, during the early development of the inclusive provisions in Chinese schools, the LRC policies have been criticised as rather inadequate in providing clear, systematic, and effective guidance for improving teaching practices, restructuring school management, or reforming the education systems (Gan, 2010; Li, 2013). Critiquing the state of LRC practices, scholars have coined terms such as 似搞非搞 (*si gao fei gao*, seem, do, not, do), similar to 'it only looks like we are doing it, but actually, perhaps, we are not really' (Deng & Jing, 2013), 随班混读 (*sui ban hun du*, with class, chaos, read), similar to 'being chaotically present in regular classrooms' (Peng & Deng, 2011), and 随班就坐 (*sui ban jiu zuo*, with class, to sit), or sitting in regular classrooms (Chen et al., 2006). Human Rights Watch (2013) is similarly critical that despite the Chinese government's efforts to improve special education in terms of the increased access to formal education, there are no clear and consistent strategies for high-quality mainstream inclusive provisions. Starting to address these issues, the policy development in the next stage between 2014–2020 offers increasing clarity.

From 2014 to 2020 – Special education promotion plans

In 2014, major systematic national guidelines for special and inclusive education were updated in the milestone policy paper Special Education Promotion Plan 2014–2016 (MoE, 2014). The guidelines include supporting further development of special education infrastructure, reforming school administrative structures regarding teacher employment, increasing the salaries of the teachers who work with children with disabilities, providing special educational teacher training, creating a national curriculum for special education, and giving more freedom to the local governments to reform curriculum and classroom practices according to the local conditions (*ibid.*). It sets a target of 90% enrolment rate into compulsory education for children who are deaf, blind, or have learning difficulties by the end of 2016 (*ibid.*). However, not all children with disabilities were eligible for LRC. As for other disabled children who fall outside these three categories, no clear plan was mentioned. Furthermore, for the three mentioned categories, LRC was not specified as a priority. Special schools can be equally promoted as they are part of the compulsory education.

Particularly, enhancing special education resource rooms in regular schools is highlighted as a new area of development towards inclusion in the promotion plan (MoE, 2014). A separate national guideline specifying standards for such resource rooms was later published in 2016, which requires that at the compulsory education stage, schools having more than five students with a recognised disability need to have a special education resource room (MoE, 2016). These schools will then serve as inclusive education resource centres for their neighbouring schools (*ibid.*). However, having additional resources physically present in schools does not necessarily make schools more inclusive if the resources are not effectively used. Research shows that such resource rooms can be seen as a tick box exercise without being put into much actual use (Peng &

Zou, 2017). Inclusion is experienced and practised. Agents' crucial roles must not be absented (Qu, 2021).

Special Education Promotion Plan 2017-2020 (MoE, 2017a) offers further guidance. It sets a target of 95% enrolment rate into compulsory education for children with a recognised disability by the end of 2020 (*ibid.*). Unlike the previous promotion plan, the latest policy includes all children with a recognised disability rather than the limited three categories. It also explicitly encourages regular schools for the first time to accept children with severe or multiple learning difficulties if it is within the schools' capacity. Other first-time requirements include that special education is incorporated into all teachers' professional qualifying examinations, that local evaluation committees consisting of professionals in education, psychology, healthcare, and social work are established, that textbooks are written according to the national curriculum for special education which was published in 2016 following the first promotion plan, and that specialist educators need to receive no less than 360 hours of teacher training every five years (*ibid.*).

The most important changes in the second promotion plan may be that it updated the framework for developing special education: "LRC is the main body; special schools are the backbone; home-delivery of education and distant learning are complementary parts; and inclusive education is to be promoted all-around" (MoE, 2017a). The new framework unequivocally states inclusion as a priority of developing special education in national policies, making it clear that the transition to inclusive provisions is the ultimate goal of currently having special schools. The plan also explicitly states that a basic principle of special education is to respect differences and encourage diverse development. This signals a breakthrough in the Chinese special education policies. In time, the new framework may gradually change the old mentality that education for disabled children is mostly concerned with physical access and enrolment rate. Instead, schools and teachers are now encouraged to focus on meeting needs, celebrating diversity, and thinking about different educational institutions' social implications such as equality, justice, and rights.

The shift from simply emphasising the practical aspect of LRC to clearly promoting inclusive education in principle can also be seen from the recent legal document (State Council, 2017). It officially defines the term 'inclusive education' as "to integrate the education for disabled students into regular education to the largest extent" (*ibid.*, Article 58) and establishes it as a legal requirement for the first time. Yet this definition appears rather simplistic, generic, and does not offer adequate guidance of significance. It is also a narrow understanding of inclusive education, which only refers to disabled children while ignores the wider spectrum of diversity and differences, such as children from ethnic minority backgrounds, diverse gender identities, or migrant worker families. Nonetheless, the document specifically states for the first time that the quality of special education needs to be improved; inclusive education needs to be actively promoted; and regular schools are priority provisions for children with disabilities (*ibid.*). This is a progressive development compared to the previous official statements which were often unclear and unsystematic.

In *Chinese Education Modernisation (2035)* (State Council, 2019), 'inclusion' is highlighted among the eight basic ideas of educational development by 2035. This is the first time that 'inclusion' entered the mainstream education policy discourse as a norm rather than a sub-theme for vulnerable groups. The broad inclusive values are also clear within the other seven basic ideas, namely, morality, all-round development, education for each and everyone, life-long learning, differentiated teaching, knowledge-practice consistency, and togetherness (*ibid.*). Further, "children with disabilities enjoying suitable education" is listed as one of the eight main aims of educational development (*ibid.*). This is the first time that children with disabilities or any minority groups are specifically highlighted as part of the main aim in general educational development. Although what 'suitable education' might be is still undefined, leaving space for non-inclusive practices based on subjective judgements, it nevertheless foregrounds equal concerns of effective,

relevant and quality education for children with disabilities and promotes the much-needed awareness in this regard.

'Inclusion' thus increasingly appears to be a relatively prominent theme within the policy direction of future education in China, both in the narrow sense of children with disabilities, and in the broad sense of high-quality and equal education for each and every child. Although these policies are often strongly value-based and more agenda-setting than offering specific practical guidance, they nonetheless reaffirm government's increasing commitment to educational equality and diversity.

However, more refined definition and systematic guidance are still needed to improve the quality of provisions and the quantity of placements. There seem to be fundamental contradictions in the ways that inclusive education is understood in the policy language. Key words such as special schools as "backbone", "all-around" inclusive education, and "suitable education" for all, can nonetheless be interpreted in different ways, leaving much flexibility for what provisions can be regarded as inclusive. Special schools can be promoted in the name of "suitable" and "inclusive" education. The next stage of policy development post 2020 faces this issue by attempting to 'reconcile' special education and inclusive education through transforming the nature and purpose of special schools.

Post 2020: A Chinese model for enhancing inclusive education for disabled children

When the two promotion plan periods concluded in 2020, a policy paper was published to emphasise the importance of enhancing LRC for disabled children in the compulsory education, reaffirming inclusion as a future direction (MoE, 2020). For the first time, LRC is specified as a preferred provision for children with disabilities – "应随尽随" (*ying sui jin sui*, those who should attend regular schools are able to attend regular schools to the maximum possibility). Although "who should attend regular schools" is still not clearly defined and open to case-by-case interpretation, this nonetheless clarifies some policy ambiguity in the past three decades regarding the direction of developing inclusive provisions.

As the most recent milestone policy, *Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for Special Education Development and Enhancement* (State Council, 2022) is poised to serve as a blueprint for the development of special education in China, setting forth a clearer path and foundation for enhancing educational provisions for children with disabilities. By 2025, the nationwide enrolment rate for eligible disabled children in compulsory education should reach 97%, with a significant increase in enrolment opportunities for disabled children and adolescents in non-compulsory education stages (*ibid.*). Inclusion is again reaffirmed as a priority and a primary goal of enhancing the quality of educational provisions for disabled children. The policy highlights the following three key areas of new development.

Firstly, LRC is stressed as a responsibility of all schools for the first time and it is highlighted as the preferred provision over special schools (State Council, 2022), manifesting a continuous commitment to greater educational inclusion for children with disabilities. Although who is 'eligible' for LRC is still undefined, the policy scope for LRC is expanded beyond the compulsory education stage at a national level for the first time, where early years education and vocational schools are encouraged to admit students with disabilities into regular classrooms or set up specialised units, and universities are urged to offer more inclusive life-long learning opportunities to disabled students. Two further policy papers were published in the same year offering new clarity and guidance regarding the role of vocational schools in promoting inclusion (MoE, 2022a) and quality standards for special schools (MoE, 2022b) for the first time. This highlights the need for special schools to ensure high quality, relevant and effective educational experiences to their

students, and cannot merely concern enrolment rate or serve as ‘day care centres’ to keep excluded children within school institutions, which has been cited as reasons to reject special schools (Paul et al., 2007).

Secondly, regular schools are required to work closely together with special schools in resource sharing and knowledge exchange, emphasising the need for special schools not being left in isolation or segregation from the rest of the provisions within the education system (State Council, 2022). Specifically, more proactive inter-professional collaboration involving stakeholders from education, healthcare, civil affairs, information technology, and disabled people’s association is unequivocally encouraged, which has been often acknowledged in academic literature as effective approaches to facilitate the inclusion process (Graham, 2020; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). Further, a national curriculum including standardised textbooks for special education are suggested, which are to be included within the syllabus in both regular and special schools for the first time (*ibid.*). These textbooks have been completed and published in 2023 (MoE, 2023). This finally offers clear and official direction to teachers and schools who may have felt isolated about what they do in their individual settings, or unsure about what or how to teach children with additional educational needs due to the lack of expertise or systematic guidance (Kauffman, 2015; Peng & Deng, 2011; UNESCO, 2001).

Thirdly, the government pledged greater support and investment in terms of resource, funding, and teacher training. Both regular and special schools are supported to have greater access to local resource centres or build up their own resources rooms with necessary facilities to meet the needs of disabled students including ensuring a barrier-free environment within the school (State Council, 2022). Further, the national minimum of annual expenditure per student for special school students will be increased from RMB 6,000 (approximately GBP 687) in 2017 (MoE, 2017a) to RMB 7,000 (approximately GBP 802) by 2025 (*ibid.*). Although this increase seems minimum, in wealthy areas such as Beijing, the actual increase has already reached RMB 12,000 (approximately GBP 1,374) in 2017 (MoE, 2017b). This is also significantly higher than the funding allocated for non-disabled students, which is RMB 720 (approximately GBP 81) per student per year in primary education, and RMB 940 (approximately GBP 105) per student per year in secondary education (Ministry of Finance & MoE, 2023). In addition, the policy requires the integration of special education content into the curriculum of teacher training programmes as a compulsory component and its inclusion in the certification criteria for teacher education, while in-service teacher training must include the theme of inclusive education for teachers and headteachers from both regular and special schools (*ibid.*). The pressing need for this change has long been suggested in the literature (UNESCO, 2001; Webster & Blatchford, 2015) as it supports teachers’ continuing professional development and helps practitioners become more prepared and confident in engaging with inclusive practices in their classrooms from the beginning of their career rather than a hindsight once they face challenges.

By now, a Chinese Model of inclusive education has formed with increasing clarity, that inclusion is established as a clear priority and common goal, but special schools have been and will also be an integral part of the Chinese education system which helps to advance the inclusion agenda. A continuum of provisions is encouraged where special schools work closely with regular kindergartens and schools, with vocational schools, with the wider society where professionals from a range of fields collaborate to meet the needs of disabled students.

Making sense of inclusion policy in China – The role of special schools

The consistent emphasis on ‘special education’ and ‘special schools’ within Chinese inclusion policies seem counter-intuitive and goes against much of what international literature argues about the segregatory nature of special schools (Alderson, 2018; Goodey, 2017). The latest policy even

calls to “strengthen the construction of special education schools” (State Council, 2022a). However, a recurring theme in Chinese policy is that China has unique history, culture, and national circumstances so one cannot simply borrow from international policy and practices without adapting to local contexts. The latest policy (State Council, 2022) reiterates the traditional Confucian concepts of “teaching without discrimination” (Analects, 15.38) and “tailoring instruction to individual aptitude” (Analects, 11.22), which are student-centric pedagogical principles that have been shared and internalised by the public consensus as part of the Chinese culture since millennia. More broadly, Confucianism, guided by the philosophy of Benevolence (仁愛, *renai*) and Great Harmony (大同, *datong*), advocated for a political and ethical imperative that ensured the care and support for disabled people (Book of Rites, Liyun, 1). It instills a moral imperative of assisting the vulnerable and aiding disabled people within the Chinese culture, not out of charity, but because of ethics. Globally, inclusive education is primarily driven and justified by rights. However, in mainland China, the language of human rights may not be often used and one may even find the term alienating or annoying (Qu, 2022). Instead, Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture may serve as a more familiar and welcomed discourse for conceptualising, justifying and advancing inclusion in China (ibid.).

Thus, when inclusion is not explicitly associated with the language of rights, policies may easily adopt a more pragmatic approach and focus on meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities, not so much on where this should take place in principle. For disabled students who prefer to attend the neighbourhood regular schools, the latest policy offers strong support for this; for disabled students who may want to attend special schools for their facilities, resources or pedagogical expertise, the latest policy also facilitates the capacity building of these specialist provisions (State Council, 2022). In short, the policy vision is one that regardless of the type of schools disabled students attend, they should be able to access resources and support from the other provision to maximise their educational experiences - in other words, breaking down barriers to learning, which is among the core values of inclusion. In this regard, a recent study (Alduais & Deng, 2022) finds that from Chinese stakeholders’ views including nine academics, administrators, and practitioners, the expansion of special education and special schools is not perceived to be in conflict with the promotion of inclusive education, but rather an advantage to meet students’ additional needs which is seen as contributing to overall inclusive learning experiences. This suggests that a broader understanding of special education in China is needed.

Positive practical impact of special schools has also been recognised in the academic literature on a global scale. For example, Harris et al. (2008) find that for children with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties, special schools have significant beneficial effects on pupils’ trust, self-esteem, ability to deal with difficult feelings, and behaviour in class and at home. Reed et al. (2012) observe that children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in special schools have demonstrated better performance in terms of behavioural and social outcomes than children with ASD in mainstream schools. Similarly, Cook et al. (2016) investigate experiences of friendships, bullying, and learning of pupils with ASD in mainstream and special schools in England, and conclude that special schools may better facilitate social interactions and cope with bullying. Regarding this, Lindsay et al. (2016) conclude from their study involving interviews with parents of children with language impairment or ASD in England, that it is the quality of education provided that holds significance, rather than the specific location itself. Likewise, scholars like Allan and Brown (2001) and Qu (2015) posit that a broader interpretation of inclusion, as understood by both special school staff and students, recognises special schools as ‘inclusive’ environments where students experience a sense of belonging, make progress, and derive enjoyment from learning.

In summary, the special education reform in China is increasingly based on China's national conditions (e.g., large population, limited GDP per capita, uneven resource distribution across regions) and the sentiments of its people, seeking a distinctive path for inclusive education that is locally contextualised. Special education and special schools are seen as key resources to enhance inclusive provisions and will continue to grow in scale in China in the short term as they transform to be an integral and inter-connected part of the whole education system rather than a segregated setting, while inclusion remains a primary objective and rationale underpinning the development of educational provisions for disabled children. Nonetheless, the actual effect of this policy 'blueprint' remains to be seen, as time is needed for changes to take place. It is unknown if authentic changes will indeed happen within special schools so that they evolve from segregated provisions to a key partner for inclusion as policies prescribe. Future frequent policy development is needed to maintain the momentum and offer increasingly clearer roadmaps towards practising greater inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper has traced a significant evolution of China's inclusive education policy development spanning over three decades. Beginning with the recognition of Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) in the late 1980s, to explicitly establishing inclusion as a priority in education for children with disabilities, and to indicating inclusion as a basic value for future educational development concerning all children, China has demonstrated a growing commitment to promoting greater inclusion and higher quality of education for disabled children. This journey has culminated in the formulation of the *Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for Special Education Development and Enhancement* (State Council, 2022), which sets forth a clear blueprint for advancing inclusive education for children with disabilities. Admittedly, China's unequivocal commitment to inclusion (State Council, 2017) came relatively late in the global trend (DfE, 2001; IDEA, 2004; UNESCO, 1994). Nevertheless, the increasingly favourable policy environment and discourse have brought possibilities and hopes. Policy papers provide an official foundation on which inclusive education may be further developed. Frequent policy update also serves to maintain a continuous level of engagement.

As China continues its journey towards inclusive education, it is imperative to remain mindful of the inherent complexities and multifaceted nature of this process. It is now clear that the growing scale of special schools is not necessarily in conflict with China's commitment to inclusion, but is meant to be transformed and used as an approach to enhance educational quality for disabled children and to build up the inclusion capacity within the education system. The simple juxtaposition of 'regular school is good and special school is bad' would be naïve. Inclusion is rather a nuanced process that demands adaptability, perseverance, and commitment to the values of rights, equality and justice regardless of the name of the school. China's evolving inclusive education policies reflect a society in transition, grappling with the tension between tradition and innovation, economic development and ethical imperatives. Future studies are encouraged to investigate how the recent policy visions are being perceived and translated into practice at school levels, and how challenges may be effectively addressed to facilitate policy implementation. Further debates are also invited over how China's distinct culture and history contextualise its policy visions for special education and inclusive education so as to offer a deeper understanding of further advancing its inclusion agenda. The Chinese government has forged and embraced a unique, if not controversial approach that is adapted to suit the local contexts. This may also set an

example for the global community to explore and pursue localised strategies for inclusion to enhance meaningful education for all.

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Note

1. EHC plans are for children and young people up to 25 years old whose special educational, health and social care needs require more help than would normally be available in mainstream settings (DfE, 2023).

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