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The challenges of developing an understanding of inclusion as a concept for Chinese teachers

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Research context in inclusive education

In the past two decades, international education policies have been in favour of giving greater attention to children and young people with special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994; 1998). Effective endeavors have been made in the educational provisions in many countries to actively promote inclusive education depending on their economic strengths and more importantly, their awareness of social and educational inclusion (Tilstone, et al. 1998; Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Chen and Hua, 1998; Tilstone and Rose, 2003; Florian, 2006). Despite the concerns and problems associated with the implementation of inclusive education (Farrell, 2001; Evans and Lunt, 2002) evident from research, observations and classroom practices (Carlberg and Kavale, 1980; Hunt and Goetz, 1997), many countries have shown their persistence in promoting a policy of inclusion by endlessly modifying their provisions and curriculum to benefit more, if not all, students. Much research has been done in this area not only by educational theorists and professional researchers but by classroom teachers and practitioners as well (Ainscow, 1999; Thomas, et al. 1998; Robson, et al. 1988; Smith and Varma, 1996). Findings from developing countries have shown some sharp contrast from developed countries in terms of teachers' understanding of inclusive education (Xiao, 2005; Zhang, 2002; Wei, 2000; Yuen and Westwood, 2001).

Special and inclusive education in China

Although China has a civilised history and distinguished Confucian tradition of valuing education, special education as an institution was not established until 19th century (Deng, et al. 2001). In the long run, special education has generally been recognised as an important composition of education by the Chinese government and has been embedded in the national constitution. The issuing of the Law on Nine-Year's Compulsory Education for children aging from 6-15 (Ministry of Education, 1986) and the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Disabled (State Council, 1991) has required and empowered provinces to begin the process of giving everyone equal access to education. Both these laws especially entitle the right for education to children regardless of their disabilities and herald the beginning of the current wave of radical change in schools. Furthermore, the recent international commitment to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has provided a favourable and supportive atmosphere for the development of inclusive education in China. This is extremely important as traditional attitudes towards disability can be hostile (Su, 1993, cited in Pang and Richey, 2006:79). However, due to the nature of inclusive education, it remains relatively a low government priority in this densely populated country with unbalanced economic strengths in diverse regions (Yang and Wang, 1994). Some critical issues in developing an understanding of inclusion as a concept for Chinese teachers are identified through a small scale research on mainstream school teachers in China.

The study

The purpose of this study, which is the initial phase of a comparative research into

teacher career motivation and professional development in special and inclusive education in China and the UK, is to investigate teachers' understanding of inclusive education in a city in China. The result of this study can be used to illuminate further research of this nature and to provide some guidance to enhance inclusive education services through teacher education and professional development in China.

Method

Participants

The research is located in seven mainstream schools in a city in China. This selection was based on the criteria of easy access to the schools for the researcher as she had educational contacts previously with them and also active participation from the participants so that low response rate could be avoided. According to per capita GDP levels, this medium-sized city in the eastern part of China south of Shanghai belongs to the second tier next to the economically well developed cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen. The city is renowned not only for its historic and cultural heritage, but also for its dynamic economic growth and rapid development in education. The seven mainstream schools enjoy a good reputation in teaching resources, high academic attainments and positive school ethos.

Instrument

A self-completion questionnaire with close and open-ended questions was designed (Robson 2002). The close questions were presented in a 4 point Lickert rating scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The questionnaire was developed and based on previous studies (Peng, 2003; Guo, 2004) in this area in order that comparative data might be obtained. The questionnaire sought data about teachers' motivation for teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream or special schools, their self-evaluated competence in teaching them, their perceptions on the educational placement for children with special educational needs and their desire for professional development to meet the expectations of inclusive education. The main research questions are:

- How do you understand special and inclusive education?
- Do you have any comments on special and inclusive education in China?

Procedure

Preparations for the study involved initial talks with the local education authority on the research project and several visits to each school to obtain permission from the headteachers. The questionnaire survey was distributed with the consent from headteachers to the teachers with at least two years of teaching experiences. The schools at the heart of this study selected participants for the research or teachers self-selected themselves. The collection of data was performed separately in one school at a time, after school hours at teachers' convenience.

Altogether 460 copies of the questionnaire survey for mainstream school teachers were distributed in 2 primary schools with children aging from 6-12, 4 junior middle schools with children aging from 13-15 and 1 senior middle school with students aging from 16-18. Rich data were expected with this range of school types. The return rate was: N=327 (71.1%). As the sample was purposeful and selective with a lack of representativeness, the associated weaknesses were obvious. In addition, the data

were still raw. Therefore, the researcher is mindful that any generalisation could be inadequate without the further in-depth research which will follow these initial investigations.

Analysis

The data from the close-ended items in the questionnaire were entered into Excel and analysed. The qualitative data extracted from the survey instrument were analysed on the basis of the assumption that teachers' beliefs about and acceptance of inclusive education were significant predictors of the degree to which they carried out inclusive practices. Three main themes were generated and discussed: teacher' general knowledge about special and inclusive education, their perceptions on special and inclusive education in China and their self competence evaluation in working with children with special needs.

Results

For the close-ended items, within the cohort of 327 respondents, 58.5% stated that they had low motivation in respect of teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Of the same respondents, 70.3% had no interest in pursuing opportunities to teach in special schools. 48.9% of the respondents believed that they were not well qualified or equipped to teach children with special educational needs in mainstream schools, and 59.6% felt that they had no qualification or experience for teaching in special schools as far as their self-evaluated competence was concerned. 76.2% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that children with special educational needs should be taught in special schools. However, 73.7% of the respondents had the desire for professional development to meet the expectation of inclusive education.

Among the 327 respondents, 100 of them did not answer any of the open-ended questions (30.6%). The remaining respondents, 227 had full or partial answers to the questions.

Question1: How do you understand special education?

Don't know	Never thought of it	No comments	Total	No answer
21 (19.6%)	7 (6.5%)	3 (2.8%)	107	120 (52.9%)

Question 2: How do you understand inclusive education?

Don't know	Negative	No comments	Total	No answer
43 (45.7%)	19 (20.2%)	3 (3.2%)	94	133 (58.6%)

3. Do you have any comments on special and inclusive education in China?

Don't know	Negative	No comments	Total	No answer
24 (25.3%)	11 (11.6%)	21 (22.1%)	95	132 (58.1%)

Discussion

Leyser, Kapperman and Keller (1994) conducted a cross-cultural study of teachers' attitudes towards integration in the USA, Germany, Israel, Ghana, Taiwan and the Philippines. Their findings showed that there were differences in attitude to integration between these countries. The majority of the teachers surveyed in the developing countries had strong negative feelings about inclusion (Snyder, 1999, cited in Al-Zyoudi, 2006). "Specific problem areas are perceived as being insufficient

teacher training and less positive teacher attitudes. Teacher attitudes are generally seen as decisive for achieving inclusive education and these attitudes depend heavily on their experience (specifically with students with SEN), their training, the support available and other conditions such as the class size and their workload” (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2005:13). This is true in China, as inclusive education is yet to be accepted by teachers according to the data obtained. The factors that influence their understanding which further cause challenges of developing inclusion are discussed below:

Teachers’ understanding of special education

Despite the government’s endeavour towards reform of special education, access to school for disabled children is still limited in some disadvantaged areas. Before the Law on Nine-Year’s Compulsory Education (1986), education for those with physical or intellectual disabilities was the pure responsibilities of their families. Although local governments were urged to run special educational schools or classes (MoE, 1986, Article 9), in 1987 special schools enrolled fewer than 6 percent of all eligible children. The most comprehensive disability laws (National People’s Congress, 1990, State Council, 1996) called for compulsory 9 years of education to be provided to children with disabilities. However, education for children with severe learning difficulties was not mentioned directly in these policies (Pang and Richey, 2006). Some further documents to facilitate reform in special education (MoE, 2001) still did not include the education for children who are physically able but with a range of special educational needs. This conveys a generally misleading message to teachers that special needs education is not for children with social, emotional and behavioural problems or those who are gifted and talented. Therefore, these children are not entitled to receive special education and are deemed to be excluded from the legislation. The term special education is very often narrowly or exclusively related to the education for the physically or intellectually disabled in China. This causes the problem of conceptual equivalence in international fieldwork.

“My school is a key school. There are no students with special needs”.

A teacher in a senior school

Teachers’ perceptions of inclusion: integration

“It is necessary for countryside schools to have inclusion as there are not enough special schools and children need to receive this compulsory education”.

A teacher in a primary school

“Inclusive education is a good thing. But I am not interested in it”.

A teacher in a primary school

“I don’t think we can provide inclusive education in China at present. Children with difficulties are only physically integrated. No support is available in their academic studies. If they catch up, they catch up, or they are excluded. Teachers don’t care. Who can afford to care for them when you have another 60 students waiting to be supported? We are not to blame, are we? They (children with

difficulties) are different, anyhow. How can I possibly address the needs of all?"

A teacher in a primary school

Inclusive education in China has some distinctive characteristics from its commonly known international interpretations (CSIE, 1996; Inclusive International, 1996; DfES, 2001) which basically means to enable children to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities, whatever their needs. It is more integration based in a Chinese context. According to Chen (1996:82), Sui Ban Jiu Du (which translates as integration in mainstream schools), the Chinese version of inclusion, has a function of providing compulsory education and has been adopted as the main mode of educating children with disabilities in economically disadvantaged areas with a limited number of special schools to accommodate these children. This integration first began in rural and remote areas in late 1980s as the means of improving school enrollment and eliminating illiteracy. It is not a formal process of inclusion as neither specialists nor educators with basic and necessary knowledge are available to address the special needs of the children. The inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools has provided equal opportunities for schooling for children with difficulties but meanwhile posed new challenges to the whole education system. The challenges imply that with China being caught in the shift of a new paradigm, especially in the increasing demand on teachers with special education training and their further professional development, there is a need to improve existing educational attitudes from teachers (Wu, 2005).

Teachers' lack of competence in inclusive education

A girl is now in my class and I don't know what is wrong with her. She is so slow in learning. Anyhow, I am not responsible for this. She should not be placed in my class which is so highly competitive.

A teacher in a senior middle school

In the development of inclusive education, the most pressing challenge is the scarcity of qualified special teachers. Teachers' lack of motivation working in inclusive education is due to the issues of low social status and recognition, poor salary, inadequate working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional development. On the one hand, government documents (e.g., MoE, 2001, Article 10) attached great importance to the training of the teachers for special needs education. On the other hand, the government's statistics (MoE, 2003) show that only about 50% of the teachers and staff had received some special training. The Educational Laws for the Disabled (1994, Article 4) made it clear that it is the local government's responsibility to oversee the education of the disabled, and yet there are tremendous differences in the educational provision and the support for teacher education due to the financial constraints. This inevitably influences the career choice of people and the retention of teachers in inclusive education. Though the research literature in the field of teacher education is extensive (Li, 1999; Paine, 1991), very little literature exists that describes the feelings and thoughts of teachers in special and inclusive education (Chen 2005). Even less exists about the motivation for their career choices and the necessity and chances for their professional development.

“Above all, China has been striving to catch up with the world in the aspect of educational provision. But there exists a major gap from developed countries in special and inclusive education. At present China is still encountering challenges related to the poverty in vast rural areas with a total population of 80% living in these areas. The identification and diagnostic procedures for children with special needs is undeveloped. Family and professional collaboration has not been established. The education facilities for children with special needs are not sufficiently equipped. Curriculum is not timely revised, just to name a few”.

A headteacher of a junior school

The implications for future research

Teacher professional development in inclusive education is emphasised by all levels (DfEE, 2000) as a key factor in developing an understanding of inclusion with regards to the conditions required to promote a more equitable education system (Davies and Garner, 1997; Garner, 1996; Mittler 2000). Teacher training and efficacy research have also been favoured areas for investigation (Younger, et al. 2004). Though comparative studies into inclusive education are not new (Ballard, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Mitchell, 2005), work of this nature in respect of teacher voices is worthy of further exploration. The findings of the research revealed some similar issues and challenges identified by research conducted in other areas in China on the promotion of inclusive education from teachers' perceptions. Future research can also empower children with special needs to articulate their perspectives of inclusive education. This will allow for the research to provide academic and practical significance to the limited body of knowledge in special and inclusive teacher education in China.

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