

Chinese regular classroom teachers' understanding of barriers to inclusive education

La comprensione delle barriere all'educazione inclusiva: uno studio su insegnanti curricolari cinesi

Lishuai Jia

Faculty of Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China – lsjia@niepr.ecnu.edu.cn

Marina Santi

University of Padova, Italy – marina.santi@unipd.it

Since 1980s, China has initiated formal education reform, namely 'Learning in Regular Classrooms', towards inclusive education. Reforms in the last three decades have resulted in considerable changes and progress in many aspects of inclusive education monitor system, regular school organization, financial funding system and special service provision. However, the current Chinese inclusive education development is still shaky because of various barriers. Unless these barriers are identified and successfully addressed, it is unlikely that China can achieve a comprehensive inclusive education. The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to inclusive education and suggest measures that could be employed to clear these barriers in Chinese regular school context, while mainly based on the data collected from 26 regular classroom teachers' interviews in Shuangliu District, Sichuan province. Significant barriers were mentioned by regular classroom teachers contained: lacking of professional knowledge on special and inclusive education, existing ways of thinking within regular school, inadequate special education service provision and opposition of regular students' parents. Possible strategies for overcoming the barriers were provided by regular classroom teachers as well. The results inform that further develop Chinese inclusive education should carefully address the barriers that are mentioned by regular classroom teachers.

Key-words: inclusive education, chinese regular classroom teachers, learning in regular classrooms, barriers, strategies.

abstract

Esiti di ricerca e riflessione sulle pratiche

(A. ricerca qualitativa e quantitativa; B. progetti e buone pratiche; C. strumenti e metodologie)

The co-authors of the paper are equally responsible of the content, derived from the Lishuai Jia's doctoral research, supervised by Marina Santi. Marina Santi is the scientific responsible of the research project and the methodological design. Lishuai Jia is responsible of the literature review, data collecting and analysis, and paper writing. The choice of theoretical framework and final discussion are fruit of a sharing work.



Introduction

Since the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 1994), the inclusive education has become 'a global agenda' as one group of commentators called (Piji, Meijer, and Hegarty 1997) and many countries have made considerable efforts to reduce inequity and inequality in pre-existing school systems and provide appropriate education for all students (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Booth and Ainscow 1998). China is no exception. In 1978, China reopened the national door under Deng's initiative of reform and opening up policy, which inevitably produced a tremendous influence on all aspects of Chinese society. Within that reform environment, the ideas of integration, and then mainstream, inclusive education were introduced to China and undoubtedly that these Western concepts exerted a profound impact on China's special education and regular education (Deng and Harris 2008; Deng and Poon-Mcbrayer 2012). Since the mid-1980s, based on Chinese rural areas' spontaneous Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) initiative, which means students with disabilities in poor rural areas have been put into the neighbouring regular schools to receive basic education, while combining with the experiences drawing from Western countries' mainstream schooling reform, a series of policies were issued by Chinese government to make regular school education more inclusive (e.g. Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2012; Hua 2003; Jia 2018; Piao 2004, 2008; Mitchell and Desai 2005; Xiao 2005; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018). With years of continuous efforts, in 2014 the notion of inclusive education was firstly adapted in *The Plan of Special Education Improvement (2014-2016)* (State Council 2014) and related issues on how to prepare inclusive education teachers, how to build resource centers and how to manage regular schools' inclusive education were clearly provided, which well illustrates Chinese government shares the common commitment and goal of inclusion. However, this is not the whole story! Barriers to successful implementation of inclusive education policy are still a critical issue that requires particular attention. Related studies on inclusive education from local and international researchers have shown that various barriers continue to hamper the implementation of inclusive education policy in China. Those frequently mentioned and highlighted barriers by researchers include traditional values of Confucianism (e.g. Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2012; Mitchell and Desai 2005; Potts 2000), examination-oriented education system (e.g. Chen 1996, 1997; Mitchell and Desai 2005, Jia 2018), inadequate preparation of regular school teachers (e.g. Deng et al. 2017; Xu, Cooper, and Sin, 2018; Yu et al. 2011) and uneven educational development across China (e.g. Peng 2010, 2011; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018).

From the perspective of policy implementation, school directors and teachers are considered as street-level bureaucrats because they put the government policy into practice through their day-to-day school teaching decisions and routines (Lipsky 1980). Considering that, studies indicated that teachers and principals' reinterpretation and translation of the government policies within their own understanding that often directly contradicted the original intentions that set by the policymakers (Wong 1991; Wong and Anagnostopoulos 1998). Furthermore, Lipsky (1980) stated that the high levels of teachers and principals' discretion of policy mainly stemmed, to some extent, from endemic uncertainties and complexities of the work which they perform. Given that, it is necessary that the implementation of inclusive education policy requires to be defined and redefined with local stakeholders, especially regular school teachers (RCTs). It is RCTs who implement inclusive education policy



through their everyday decisions and routines. Just as many previous studies indicated that regular school teachers do play a key role in the successful implementation of inclusive education (e.g. Forlin and Chambers 2011; Yan and Deng 2019). Therefore, to explore the barriers that hamper the progress of inclusive education through the perspective of RCTs is particularly necessary as it can provide evidence-based strategies that could be employed to overcome barriers and successfully implement the inclusive education policy in the future.

Although previous studies have already conducted a lot in terms of barriers to inclusive education, there is still a need for researches to focus on the barriers to inclusive education, or as we will name them—RCTs' understanding of barriers to inclusive education. Researches like that are particularly necessary for China. On one hand the history of developing inclusive education in China is not as long as Western countries and many barriers to inclusion still need to be explored and overcome, while on the other hand inclusive education, as a new Western concept, was introduced to China, which definitely leads to some tensions when applying it into Chinese specific social-cultural context, which must be carefully examined in order to successfully implement inclusive education (Deng and Liu 2013; Deng and Su 2012; Deng and Zhu 2007).

The development of inclusive education in China

As early as the 1950s, in *Dabashan*, Sichuan province, the students with disabilities were placed into the neighbouring regular schools to receive the basic education as those poor rural areas lacked of resources to build special schools for these students (Hua 2003; Piao 2004, 2008; Xiao 2005), and this voluntary and spontaneous practice later was called 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' (LRC). Since 1978, under Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policy's impact, all aspects of Chinese society started a new reform journey. In 1982 the revised Constitution was published to mandate education and social support for all persons with disabilities, which was also the first policy to mandate special education in Chinese history (Deng and Harris 2008; Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2012). Around the middle of 1980s, although the LRC was popular in many Chinese areas, however, it did not attract government attention until 1987. In 1987, the researcher Xu Bailun, the predecessor of LRC, initiated the "Golden Key Blind Children Education Plan" in several provinces of China (Xu 2012). The main content of this plan was to enable blind children to attend regular classrooms together with regular students. The experiment of LRC was a success on educating children with disabilities, particularly for those with visual impairment, hearing impairment or intellectual disability, in regular classrooms. And shortly this LRC model was accredited by the Chinese Disabled Persons' Federation (Xu 2012). As a good model to educate students with disabilities, the LRC started to acquire government acceptance and to be promoted through the whole China. With the development of LRC in Chinese various areas and continuous emergence of some new problems, effective measures need to be taken to solve these various problems. In 1994, *Trial Measures of Implementing Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities* (Ministry of Education 1994) was issued, which was the first national level policy that specifically for LRC, in which a series of measures were issued to improve the LRC, like the LRC targets, professional training, teaching requirements, management issues, etc. After nearly



twenty years of efforts (1978-1994), the spontaneous LRC finally become a national action, which has spread to nearly all Chinese provinces and municipalities (Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018).

Subsequently, the LRC entered an expansion era (1995-2010). Encouraging regular schools to accept more and more students with disabilities to study at regular classrooms has become a top priority among Chinese various education reform agendas and a series of policies were issued to ensure this reform. In 2001, *Suggestions on Further Advancing Reform and Development of Special Education in the Tenth Five Years* (State Council 2001) encouraged regular schools to accept more and more students with disabilities to study in their classrooms. In 2006, the revised Compulsory Education Act (State Council 2006) was issued and regular schools should unconditionally accept the school-aged children with disabilities as long as they are able to study in the regular classrooms, and at the meantime the LRC was firstly written into Chinese law system. While from statistical perspective, in 1992, 129,400 students with disabilities enrolled in school (both special and regular schools) and only 28% (36,558 students with disabilities) of them were in regular schools (Deng and Guo 2007). With years of efforts, in 2009, 428,100 students with disabilities enrolled in school, while approximately 65.0% of the students with disabilities were in regular classrooms (Ministry of Education 2011). Undoubtedly after those years' development, just as some scholars (e.g. Deng, Poon-Mc Brayer, and Farnsworth 2001; Jia 2018; Piao 2004; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018) argued that LRC model has already become the main body to deliver educational provision for students with disabilities.

In 2014, the notion of inclusive education was firstly adapted in *the Plan of Special Education Improvement (2014-2016)* (State Council, 2014) and related measures on how to well develop LRC were provided. What is more important is that after these years' development of LRC and researchers' introduction of inclusive education, to some extent, the opinion that LRC is equal to inclusive education is officially admitted. Undoubtedly, there are some differences between LRC and inclusive education in terms of origin, founding principles, growing context, etc (Deng et al. 2001; Deng and Zhu 2007; Li 2010; Liu 2008; Yu et al. 2011; Zhang 2010). However, after these years of development, the LRC has already become a localised inclusive education initiative to enrol children with special educational needs into regular education schools (Yan, Deng, and Ma 2019) and in that thinking LRC, to some extent, is widely considered as and used interchangeably with inclusive education by researchers (Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2004, 2012; Feng 2010; Jia 2018; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018). Considering that, in current study the LRC and inclusive education will be used interchangeably. While a key focus of current research is on the inclusion of students with disabilities in Chinese regular schools.

Inclusive education has gained much attention across Chinese policy discourses. However, the poor quality of inclusive education has been criticized by many Chinese researchers (e.g. Jia 2018; Li 2015; Peng 2011). Currently, it is a high time that inclusive education development orientation should shift from previous mainly expanding quantity to improving quality while ensuring quantity (Jia 2018). However, that transformation cannot be easily realized and the inclusive education policies cannot be directly translated into practice, therefore, it is necessary to identify various barriers faced by China further to promote inclusive education. Given that, this paper aims to identify barriers that hamper the implementation of inclusive education and provide evidence-based strategies that could be employed to



overcome these barriers in future development of inclusive education in China. Considering the research aims, two research questions will guide us: (1) from RCTs' perspective, what the barriers to implement inclusive education in Chinese regular school context are, and (2) what measures need to be taken to address the barriers that RCTs mentioned?

Methods

Current study is a part of three-year project 'Comparing Inclusive Education: Struggles in Italy and China' which was conducted in Italy and China between 2016 and 2019. In this section, we briefly present sample, instrument and related issues in relation to current study.

Participants

In 2014 and 2018, the Department of Education of Sichuan province issued the *Implementation Plan of Chengdu Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016)* (Department of Education of Sichuan province 2014) and *The Second Special Education Promotion Plan of Sichuan Province (2017-2020)* (Department of Education of Sichuan province 2018) respectively. Both of these policy documents aim to further improve inclusive education in Chengdu and related measures are provided to ensure the inclusive education promotion. Among 20 districts of Chengdu, Shuangliu District has been considered as the most advanced district leading inclusive education reform. Because of its achievement in promoting inclusive education, Shuangliu District was approved as one of the National Special Education Reform Programme pilots by Minister of Education of People's Republic of China in 2015 (Minister of Education 2015). With these years of efforts, Shuangliu District's inclusive education reform is regarded as one of the best in China and its success is approved by Minister of Education of People's Republic of China (Minister of Education 2018). As a Chinese representative, Shuangliu District's inclusive education is regarded as a successful case study to spread globally, in a project conducted jointly by UNESCO and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (Jia and Shi 2019).

Participants in current study were RCTs from primary and low secondary schools, who currently teach students with disabilities in their classrooms. 26 RCTs from 11 schools (9 elementary and 2 low secondary schools) in Shuangliu District were selected employing purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007), which is a widely employed sampling method that bases on data collected from the information-rich cases that 'one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research' (Patton 2002, p.230). Among the participants, there are 22 females (84.62%) and 4 males (15.38%). Participants' age between 27 to 62 and the mean age is 38.48. In every RCT's class there is at least has one student with disability certificate which is issued by local government.



Instruments

The interview protocols named 'Comparing Inclusive Education: Struggles in Italy and China' were developed, which contains six open-end questions focusing on RCTs' understanding of inclusive education based on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) understanding theory. Particularly, question 3 and 6 are related to current study, which are: 3) what the barriers to implement inclusive education policy in Chinese regular school context are, and 6) what measures need to be taken to address the barriers that RCTs mentioned?

Procedure

The survey was conducted between October 2016 and May 2019. Data collection was conducted in five steps. Firstly, the researcher contacted the Director of Special Education Department of Sichuan Academy of Education Sciences to recommend inclusive schools in Shuangliu District. Secondly, after identifying the sample schools, with the official reference issued by Special Education Department of Sichuan Academy of Education Sciences the researcher contacted the directors of sample schools to book a meeting to discuss current study and related issues. Thirdly, following the appointment date, the researcher visited all directors of sample schools to state aims of current research and asked directors to recommend RCTs who are mainly involved in the school's inclusive education practice. Fourthly, with sample schools directors' recommendation, the researcher contacted RCTs one by one to book an appointment for interview. Finally, following the appointment date the researcher conducted interviews with RCTs. Each interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and all the interviews were audio-taped with the consent of participants all the interviews conducted in the sample schools and research in each sample school required three to four working days to complete.

Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and detailed reading of the transcripts was conducted to be familiar with the interviews' original content (Flick 2009). With regard to analyzing the interview data, thematic analysis was the primary method of analysis in current research. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis is an appropriate analysis method when the research explores an under-research area. This is suitable for current study as China is a country where inclusive education is recent and under-researched phenomenon (Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2004, 2012; Jia 2018; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018). Procedural steps of thematic analysis employed in current study involved familiarizing with the interview data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun and Clarke 2006). Meanwhile ATLAS. Ti (8.3.16 version) was employed to facilitate the data analysis.



Results

A total of eight themes were identified in the data and they were grouped into three main themes, with the eight themes being considered as sub-themes and being distributed properly. Table 1 presents how the identified three main themes and eight sub-themes were grouped. The presentation of results' order comes randomly and all barriers should be treated equally regardless of their orders. For us, all barriers identified in current study need to be properly addressed if Chinese regular schools want to successfully achieve the aim of inclusive education.

Barriers related to RCTs

Lack of professional knowledge and teaching ability

Regardless of RCTs' willingness to include students with disabilities in their classrooms, nearly all RCTs stated that lack of related knowledge and ability to teach these students is one of the biggest barriers to promote inclusive education in current Chinese regular school context. According to RCTs, the lack of knowledge and ability can act as a barrier in three ways. Firstly, lack of knowledge and ability leads to RCTs having no pedagogies for teaching students with disabilities. For the majority of RCTs, they have not received any knowledge related to inclusive and special education during their pre-service teaching education programmes, which inevitably leads RCTs to have no proper pedagogies for teaching the students with disabilities in their classrooms. Therefore, students with disabilities are frequently neglected in RCTs' teaching and isolated from classroom activities. Rather than learning in regular classrooms, most students with disabilities just sit in the regular classrooms because RCTs do not have ability to help them. Secondly, many RCTs in current study expressed the view that as a teacher they really want to teach all students in their classrooms, however, at the same time they are afraid of 'with good intentions but doing something wrong'. Because of the lack of related ability, RCTs are afraid of doing some wrong to students with disabilities although RCTs are with good intentions. As nowadays many Chinese families only have one child, teachers will be accused of doing wrong to their child by parents. Given that, rather than teaching RCTs prefer to not teach students with disabilities in case of doing something wrong to these students. Thirdly, most RCTs are unable to properly use learning resources to help students with disabilities. In many regular schools there are some kinds of specific learning resources for helping students with disabilities to learn, however, these resources are rarely used by RCTs. Using these learning resources need specific training and skills, the majority of RCTs have never received related training and this inadequate ability hinders RCTs to employ these resources in their teaching for students with disabilities. In addition, some RCTs stated that they did not want to use these learning resources as they are afraid of making some wrong to students with disabilities when they use the learning resources.

Negative attitudes towards students with disabilities

Quite a number of studies indicate that teachers' attitudes towards students with special needs play a decisive role in making schools more inclusive. Concerning current study, some RCTs still hold negative attitudes towards students with disabili-



lities in their classrooms, which clearly reflects in their various expressions when mentioning students with disabilities. For example, 'I prefer a class without students with disabilities.', 'As you know, placing a student with disabilities will definitely add more work to me. I am already busy with regular students, with no more energy and time for students with disabilities.', 'It is unfair! Why some classes have students with disabilities while others don't?', 'I do not know how to teach students with disabilities. You can put them here, but I am not sure how to teach them, so maybe they are just sitting here.', etc. Expressions like these frequently emerged in some RCTs' interviews and undoubtedly these negative ideas on students with disabilities act as a barrier. As a result, RCTs do not consider the education of these students as an integral part of their work, which inevitably makes some students with disabilities are ignored in regular classrooms.

Barriers related to regular schools

Existing ways of thinking within school

As Ainscow (2005) argued that several barriers to inclusive education arise from school's existing ways of thinking. Particularly, many existing ways of thinking within a school are 'largely taken-for-granted and, therefore, rarely discussed' (p. 121) and this fully reflects in Chinese regular school contexts. As placing students with disabilities in Chinese regular schools, a set of deeply held beliefs within regular schools are shared by RCTs 'prevent the experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working' (Ainscow 2005, p. 116). Based on data, four very common existing ways of thinking within Chinese regular schools were identified. The first thinking refers to regular schools are for the 99% regular students not for the less than 1% students with disabilities. Many RCTs stated that during their school education and working as a teacher, it is rare to see students with disabilities in the regular schools. Particularly the majority of RCTs expressed that this is the very first time they meet students with disabilities in current school. Furthermore, from the school arrangement perspective RCTs argued that regular schools were designed for normal students not for students with disabilities as there are no necessary learning resources for students with disabilities. The second popular thinking is that special school is good for students with disabilities. Most RCTs held that thinking and their main concern lies in the resources point: currently the main learning resources for students with disabilities are in special schools not regular schools, therefore, it is better to place them into the special schools to receive proper support instead of just letting them sit in the regular classrooms without any support. The third thinking is that inclusive education is an additional school agenda. In the past, students with disabilities were in special schools and regular teachers were not responsible for teaching them, while nowadays more and more students with disabilities in regular schools are imported from special schools. Therefore, RCTs need to undertake the extra work in terms of teaching students with disabilities. This additional school agenda, inclusive education, makes RCTs' workload heavier than before, which definitely leads to RCTs forming a negative attitude towards students with disabilities. The fourth one refers to medical model of disability. The majority of RCTs still hold a deficient thinking on students with



disabilities and regard students with disabilities as patients in need of fixing, or, worse, therefore, beyond fixing. This deeply entrenched deficient views on students with disabilities leads to some RCTs give up some students with disabilities, partly because of their high level of disabilities, partly because lack of related abilities to fix these students. All these four existing ways of thinking are still popular within Chinese regular schools and act as significant barriers to developing inclusive education.

Inadequate special education service provision

When placing and educating students with special education needs in regular schools, the basic question needs to be asked is how special education services are to be provided at regular school. Considering current Chinese regular school context, RCTs argued that special education service provision is seriously inadequate. Currently, two kinds of special education services reported by RCTs, however, are both in lower level and unable to meet students with disabilities' learning needs. Firstly, all the regular schools in current study have resource rooms and resource teachers to help students with disabilities, however, all these resource teachers are part-time, which means all resources teachers are RCTs as well. Particularly, the first role of these teachers is RCTs and the second role is school resources teachers. What is worse, most of them have never had any training on special and inclusive education before, so they have no or limited knowledge on how to use resource rooms to help students with disabilities. Resource room, to some extent, is just a useless decoration. Additionally, as resource teacher is a part-time role of RCTs, most of them regard themselves as RCTs, and they are mainly responsible for regular students, therefore, they rarely fulfill their role as resource teachers. Secondly, a support system between the local special school and regular schools was established to support RCTs and students with disabilities in regular schools. However, there are two acute problems in this support system, one problem is that limited special teachers cannot meet the need of local regular schools. Thus, some regular schools cannot receive necessary help when needed. Another one is special school teachers are not familiar with operation system of regular schools, so their help and advice for better educating students with disabilities cannot work well in regular schools, sometimes even contradict with regular schools' agenda. For example, currently smaller group teaching for students with disabilities can hardly be implemented in Chinese regular schools. Above two poor special education services need to improve so that students with disabilities can receive appropriate education in regular schools rather than solely sitting in the regular classrooms.

Big class size and small number of students with disabilities

Currently, Chinese regular primary and secondary schools' class size ranges from 40 to 50, while in some developed it could even be 60 or more for its high qualified education resources. Considering current study, the sample schools' class size is around 50. With already so many regular students in the class, putting one or two students with disabilities into the class will inevitably influences both the teaching of RCTs and learning of students with (out) disabilities. This problem was nearly highlighted by all RCTs. Because of RCTs' limited energy, time, and ability, ignoring or paying limited attention to students with disabilities in their classrooms is their first choice. Many RCTs stated that with such big class size, they are already busy



with regular students, like marking students' homework and grading students' examination papers, so it is difficult to separate more energy and time for one or two students with disabilities in the classroom, which leads to students with disabilities usually just sitting in the chair. Furthermore, compared with large number of normal students, the small number of students with disabilities are usually neglected by RCTs and school directors. At class level, compared with around 50 regular students one or two students with disabilities are easily ignored by RCTs, while at school level, compared with around 2,500 regular students, a dozen of students with disabilities are usually neglected by school director when he/she makes the school development plan. Expressions like 'students with disabilities are in a small number', 'sometimes I will forget them (students with disabilities) as there is only one in my class', 'this school has more than 2,500 normal students, and the director sometimes forgets this small number of students with disabilities', etc., which frequently emerged in RCTs' interviews. For RCTs and directors, their primary responsibility is for the majority-regular students rather than the minority-students with disabilities. Therefore, RCTs' teaching strategies and directors' school plan, to some extent, mainly focus on the majority, while at expense of the minority. This working habit needs to be changed if regular schools want to be more inclusive.

Unclear inclusive education workload identification standard

Undoubtedly, placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms will require RCTs to pay more attention. This is particularly obvious in Chinese regular school context as all resource teachers are part-time, nearly all the work relates to students with disabilities is undertaken by RCTs, as well as the work of regular students. In our survey, only two sample regular schools have a clear inclusive education workload identification system and RCTs are paid for their related workload on students with disabilities. While the majority of sample regular schools still do not have a clear inclusive education workload identification criterion, RCTs who involved in inclusive education in these schools are without any pay and all the additional work related to students with disabilities are voluntary. What is even worse, one regular school's director does not even know there is a student with disability in the school, and the regular classroom teacher who is responsible for that student was crying during the interview as nobody ever asked her about this student with disability in the past four years, as a researcher I am the first person who asks her work concerning that student. As RCTs expressed the view that although they really pay more effort on teaching and managing the students with disabilities in their classrooms, and they do not want to ask more salary for that, however, school should have a clear inclusive education workload identification system to identify and acknowledge their efforts, and this is the minimum requirement asked by RCTs.

Barriers related to wider context

Rather than operating in a vacuum, schools operate in a society. Therefore, we cannot divorce schools from the wider social contexts as there are a range of contextual factors that can support or undermine the promotion of inclusive education in



schools. From the data, two contextual barriers were identified, which are examination-oriented education system and regular students' parents' opposition.

Examination-oriented education system

During the interviews, expressions as 'countless exams', 'Midterm examination', 'Middle School Entrance Examination (*Zhongkao*)', 'College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*)', 'students' scores', 'class's average score', 'learning for exam, for test', 'score is a student's life', 'teaching for score', etc., were frequently mentioned by all the RCTs when asked the challenges to include students with disabilities in the regular classrooms. These various expressions fully illustrate the fact that influenced by Confucianism, the examination culture derives from the imperial examination system, *ke ju kao shi*, is still existing and dominating contemporary Chinese educational system. Therefore, frequent exams and pursuit of high score have become the two most important principles that guide policy priorities within whole Chinese education system. Under such circumstances, with an exam agenda that heavily relied on scores as the yardstick of students' progress and success, the government policy, school plan and teacher teaching all narrowly focus on how to improve students' test score. So when it comes to placing students with disabilities in the regular classrooms, one question stands out above the rest is: Does this decision produce a negative impact on normal students' score? Rather than considering students with disabilities' interest, regular students' score is the first thing school director and RCTs think of when they consider whether or not to include students with disabilities in the regular classrooms. Given the importance of score, many RCTs are afraid that placing students with disabilities in their classes will lower their classes' average score, particularly when the class' average score means all for RCTs. RCTs' salary, promotion, prize, etc., which all depends on the class's average score. For students, the meaning of success mainly means they can get a high score in various examinations, like 'Midterm examination', 'Middle School Entrance Examination' and 'College Entrance Examination'. As RCTs stated if placing students with disabilities in regular class produces a negative influence on normal students' score, who should be responsible for that? Additionally, RCTs emphasized that as a student you are not only competing with your classmates, but also competing with all the other students in this school, this school district, this province and even the whole China. For example, College Entrance Examination. Constrained by that policy environment, although placing students with disabilities in their classrooms, RCTs' teaching plan, strategies and assessment remain largely unchanged. Raising scores is still the center of the whole school agenda. As RCTs maintained that surrounded by non-inclusive policy environment and examination-oriented education, the journey to inclusive education in China still has a long way to go.

Regular students' parents' opposition

Currently, many Chinese families only have one child because of the past one-child policy. Thus, parents pay considerable attention to their only child's education as currently through education to change one person's fate and one family's future is still a common view in China. With that mind, nearly all parents spare no effort to



facilitate their children to get a high score in school's various exams. Therefore, if something happens to hinder their child's study, their parents will undoubtedly do whatever they can to clear up these obstacles. According to RCTs, when students with disabilities firstly placed in the regular classrooms, where for them is a totally new and unknown environment, so they do some strange behaviours and make some strange noises, which inevitably disturbs or interrupts classroom teaching, particularly the situation will become worse as RCTs have no ideas how to handle them and no available related special services. After school, regular students tell this 'interesting story', a strange classmate makes strange behaviours and noises during the class teaching, to their parents. For regular students, they consider this strange classmate is good because they do not need to study when this strange student disturbs or interrupts the class, however, for their parents this is rather an interesting thing, but a serious problem as that influences their child's study. As RCTs reported regular students' parents firstly will require to change into a new class where there are no students with disabilities. If that does not work, regular students' parents will write a letter together to school to ask school director to 'send' this student with disability to elsewhere or even worse they will go to the school director's office together to argue on that thing. Facing that, some schools choose to send the students with disabilities to local special education school to meet the demand of regular students' parents. In addition, the majority of parents of students with disabilities will choose to keep silence when that happens as they can understand regular students' parents' feeling. Particularly, when compared with the large number of normal students' parents, the families of students with disabilities only accounts for a small part, which, to some extent, reinforces parents of students with disabilities to keep silence. Nearly for all RCTs, they totally understand normal parents' behaviours, just as one regular classroom teacher said 'as a teacher I support inclusive education, as a mother I am against inclusive education'.

Measures needed to be taken to address barriers to inclusive education

The RCTs' data showed that in order to successfully promote inclusive education in Chinese regular school context, three primary issues needed to be addressed. Particularly, these three measures mentioned here cannot represent all measures needed to be taken and cannot address all the barriers to inclusion in current Chinese regular school context. However, employing RCTs' words, these three measures are 'mostly urgent and necessary' in current Chinese regular school context for developing inclusive education. For example, compared with enhancing in-service teacher training, measures like reducing class size, redesigning Chinese in-service teacher education programmes and changing Chinese examination-oriented education system, to some extent, are more difficult to achieve, which needs more time and effort. Therefore, based on the principle of respecting RCTs' opinions, here we give priority to these three emergent measures.

Enhancing in-service teacher training on inclusive and special education

As nearly all RCTs feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities, therefore, improving in-service teacher training on inclusive and special education was recom-



mended as a necessary strategy to enhance their profession abilities. RCTs argued that their in-service teacher education programmes did not contain any inclusive and special education contents, and what is even worse current in-service teacher training programmes paid limited or zero attention to inclusive and special education, which undoubtedly makes RCTs cannot teach students with disabilities in their classrooms, cannot use well-equipped resource rooms or some even do not know the expression of inclusive education. Therefore, enhancing in-service teacher training was considered as a key strategy to improve current situation and three main in-service training priorities were identified by RCTs. Firstly, basic knowledge on inclusive and special education should be included. For example, the meaning of inclusive education, inclusive education development around the world, inclusive education policy in China, etc. As RCTs have limited or zero understanding of inclusive education, this priority mainly intends to arm RCTs' mind and, to some extent, to change their pre-existing ways of thinking, like deficient view on students with disabilities, regular schools is for 99% normal students, etc. Secondly, the training should include specific knowledge on disabilities and necessary skills to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Rather than only knowing the name of different kinds of disabilities, RCTs stated that they needed to know more about disabilities, like the causes and behaviours of Autism. Specific skills, like reading and writing Braille, using sign language and related learning materials in resource room, should be also provided to help RCTs to meet students' needs. Thirdly, how to collaborate with special education teachers should be included in the training. Currently, the only one special education service for RCTs is from special education teachers, however, many RCTs do not know how to effectively work together with special education teachers to improve students with disabilities' situation. Therefore, how to include special education teachers into RCTs classroom teaching, how to design teaching plan together, etc., are necessary to be provided to better use the only one special service.

Providing more special education services, particularly fixed professional resource teachers

Currently, the only one special service at school level to assist RCTs in educating students with disabilities is special teachers from local special school. Arguably, this special service does play a critical role in helping local regular schools develop inclusive education. However, as RCTs stated that with more and more students with disabilities are placed into regular schools, only one local special education school's teachers cannot meet regular schools' requirements, therefore some regular schools rarely received help from special school and had no access to this only special service provision. Given that, setting fixed professional resource teachers in regular schools is considered as a necessary measure to implement inclusive education by RCTs. At minimum, one regular school should have one fixed professional resource teacher. Nowadays, all resource teachers in regular schools are part-time and un-professional, therefore setting fixed professional resource teachers, on one hand can properly support students with disabilities and effectively use resource room, on the other hand can free current part-time resource teachers.



Issuing a clear inclusive education workload identification standard

At first glance, it seems that workload identification standard, to some extent, will reinforce the thinking that inclusive education is an additional school agenda, which has long been considered as a barrier to inclusion. However, when referring to current Chinese regular school context, issuing a clear inclusive education workload identification standard, is not only a necessary step but also a critical facilitator for implementing inclusive education. As we discussed earlier, currently nearly all the work related to students with disabilities is undertaken by RCTs, who are responsible for normal students as well. Undoubtedly, teaching and managing students with disabilities will require RCTs to pay more time and energy. However, currently the work related to students with disabilities is nearly done without remuneration. What is even worse, this part of work is not recognized by school directors in most Chinese regular schools. Instead of asking regular school to pay for this part of work, nearly all RCTs expressed the view that they do hope school directors and managers can recognize their effort in educating of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Put simply, RCTs' effort on promoting inclusive education should be acknowledged by school. Taking Italy for example, support teachers work together with regular teachers to implement inclusive education, and both of them receive their salary for their workload respectively. While in Chinese regular schools, one regular teacher undertakes the workload supposed to be completed by two teachers' (regular and support) but only get paid for one part of the workload, which should be seriously considered in the next step of developing inclusive education.

Discussion

The current study has attempted to identify barriers to inclusive education and suggest measures that could be employed to clear these barriers to inclusive education in Chinese regular school context. The results of current study are consistent with previous studies, barriers to inclusion in Chinese regular school context like RCTs' inadequate abilities and negative attitudes (e.g. Deng and Poon-Mcbrayer, 2012) and examination-oriented education system (e.g. Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018), and strategy to promote inclusion like setting fixed professional resource teachers in regular schools (e.g. Jia 2018). Additionally, based on three-year investigation in Chinese regular schools, current study also provides some new insights into inclusive education research in Chinese context. Considering the barriers to inclusion, results of current study argue that the main barriers are within regular school context, barriers like existing ways of thinking within regular schools and unclear inclusive education workload identification standard are two newly identified barriers that current study contributes to the pre-existing research regarding barriers to inclusion in Chinese regular school context, while we cannot underestimate the barriers related to wider context, like normal students' parents' against. On strategies for addressing these barriers, current study mainly respects RCTs' concerns which come from their day-to-day school practice. For example, compared with previous studies giving priority to redesigning pre-service teacher education programmes to arm RCTs with related profession abilities, current study reveals RCTs concern more about improving their profession abilities through in-service teacher training rather than pre-service teacher education, because the redesign



of pre-service teacher education is too difficult to achieve. Particularly, issuing a clear inclusive education workload identification standard can be considered as a new measure for developing inclusive education suggested by RCTs, which should be carefully considered within current Chinese regular school context. Any efforts that take no account of Chinese regular school context should be avoided. Finally, regarding to the research sample, previous studies focus more on inclusive education in Beijing, Shanghai and other big cities which locate in the east-developed areas (e.g. Deng et al. 2017; Ma and Tan 2010; Yan and Deng 2019; Yu 2011), while limited researches were conducted in terms of inclusive education development in west-developing areas of China. Therefore, current study, to some extent, can fill that research gap and enrich understanding of inclusive education in western part of Chinese regular school context.

Conclusion

The LRC, as a pragmatic strategy that develop by Chinese government to promote inclusive education in regular school context, particularly for students with disabilities, is rooted in Chinese specific cultural, historical and economical context and is also influenced by Western views on inclusive education (Deng and Poon-Mc Brayer 2012; Xu, Cooper, and Sin 2018). Since 1978, the past four decades has witnessed a rapid development of inclusive education across various parts of China, while currently Chinese inclusive education is undergoing a radical changing process from previous primarily expanding quantity of students with disabilities in regular classrooms to improving quality while ensuring quantity (Jia 2018). Undoubtedly, there are still various challenges needed to be addressed in order to achieve this changing process and provide appropriate education for all students. Based on RCTs' everyday school practice, barriers to inclusive education are mainly within regular school level, like existing ways of thinking within schools, a lack of special education service provision and vague inclusive education workload identification criteria. In the meantime RCT also expressed that their lack of necessary professional abilities to teach students with disabilities needs to be given a priority and properly addressed. In addition, we cannot ignore the barriers to inclusion outside school context, such as a long history of examination-oriented education culture and normal parents' against, which can produce a considerable negative impact on regular schools' moving to be more inclusive. Although there are various barriers to inclusion, RCTs still hold a positive attitude towards future development of inclusive education in China. Considering their classroom practice, series of effective measures were provided to fight with these barriers, including improving in-service teacher training on inclusive and special education, setting fixed professional resource teachers in regular schools, enacting a clear inclusive education workload identification standard.

Undoubtedly, main limitation of current study is small sample size, particularly in Chinese context which is characterised by serious regional differences in terms of social-cultural habits and socio-economic development level. Therefore, the research results should be treated cautiously. Another limitation refers to language translation, as all interviews were conducted in Chinese. When translated into English, some information will be inevitably missed and future studies should pay attention to that language issue. In addition, two implications for future studies emerged from



current study. One is more inclusive education researches needed to be conducted in western part of China, seeking to apply results of these researches to support government related policy making, and another one is that future studies need to pay attention to parents' role, especially parents of regular students, in making regular schools more inclusive.

Themes	Sub-themes
Barriers related to RCTs	Lack of professional knowledge and teaching ability
	Negative attitudes
Barriers related to regular schools	Existing ways of thinking within school
	Inadequate special education service provision
	Big class size and small number of students with disabilities
	Unclear inclusive education workload identification standard
Barriers related to wider context	Examination-oriented education system
	Regular students' parents' opposition

Table 1. Chinese RCTs' understanding of barriers to inclusive education

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was supported by 'Comparing Inclusive Education Teachers' Struggles in Italy and China Funded by Ministry of Education in China and Chinese Scholarship Council' grant number [201606990017] funded by Ministry of Education in China and Chinese Scholarship Council.

References

- Ainscow M. (2005). Developing inclusive education systems: What are the levers for change?. *Journal of Educational Change*, 6(2), 109-124.
- Ainscow M., Booth T., Dyson A. (2006). *Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion*. London: Routledge.
- Braun V., VClarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.
- Booth T., Ainscow M. (Eds.). (1998). *From them to us: An international study of inclusion in education*. London: Routledge.



- Chen Y. Y. (1997). Canji ertong suiban jiudu xiaoguo pinggu yanjiu [The research on effect evaluation of learning in the regular classroom of the disabled children]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education*, 3, 45-48. (In Chinese).
- Cohen L., Manion L., Morrison K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Deng M., Harris K. (2008). Meeting the needs of students with disabilities in general education classrooms in China. *Teacher and Special Education*, 31 (3), 195–207.
- Deng M., Liu H.L. (2013). Quanna jiaoyu lilun di shehui wenhua texing yu bentuhua jiangou [On the Socio-Cultural Features and Localization of Inclusive Education]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education*, 1, 15-19. (In Chinese).
- Deng M., Guo L. (2007). Local Special Education Administrators' understanding of Inclusive Education in China. *International Journal of Education Development*, 27, 697-707.
- Deng M., Poon-McBrayer K. F. (2004). Inclusive Education in China: Conceptualisation and Realization. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education*, 24 (2), 143-156.
- Deng M., Poon-McBrayer K. F. (2012). Reforms and Challenges in the Era of Inclusive Education: The Case of China. *British Journal of Special Education*, 39 (3), 117-122.
- Deng M., Poon-McBrayer K. F., Farnsworth E. (2001). The Development of Special Education in China: A Sociocultural Review. *Remedial and Special Education*, 22 (5), 288-298.
- Deng M., Su H. (2012). Ronghe jiaoyu zai zhongguo di jiaojie yu zaishengcheng: jiyu shehui wenhua shijiao di fenxi [Grafting and Re-generation of Inclusive Education in China: A Socio-cultural Analysis]. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 1, 83-89. (In Chinese).
- Deng M., Wang S., Guan W., Wang Y. (2017). The Development and Initial Validation of a Questionnaire of Inclusive Teachers' Competency for Meeting Special Educational Needs in Regular Classrooms in China. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21 (4), 416–427.
- Deng M., Zhu Z. Y. (2007). The Chinese 'Learning in a Regular Classroom' and Western Inclusive Education: Comparison and Exploration. *The Journal of Chinese Education and Society* 40 (4), 21–32.
- Department of Education of Sichuan province. 2014. "Implementation Plan of Chengdu Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016)." Accessed September 13, 2018. <http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/wenjian/detail.jsp?id=gT878iyLnjBDOX3DWMQU>.
- Department of Education of Sichuan province. 2018. "The Second Special Education Promotion Plan of Sichuan Province (2017-2020)." Accessed December 20, 2018. <http://gk.chengdu.gov.cn/govInfoPub/detail.action?id=1888229&tn=2>.
- Feng Y. (2010). *Teacher Career Motivation and Professional Development in Special and Inclusive Education in China*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Flick U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Forlin C., Chambers D. (2011). Teacher Preparation for Inclusive Education: Increasing Knowledge But Raising Concerns. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39 (1), 17–32.
- Hua G. D. (2003). Canji ertong suiban jiudu xianzhuang ji fazhan qushi [Current Situation and Further Direction of the Learning in Regular Classroom for Children with Disabilities]. *The Journal of Education Research* 2, 65-69. (In Chinese).
- Jia L.S. (2018). Quanna jiaoyu gaige fazhan fangshi shenshi [Examining the Reform Patterns of Inclusive Education]. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 2: 73–82. (In Chinese).
- Jia L. S., Shi C. X. (2019). *1+5+N: Using a Three-Level Resource Room System to Promote Inclusive Education (Learning in Mainstream Classrooms) in China*. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://www.inclusive-education-in-action.org/case-study/15n-using-three-level-resource-room-system-promote-inclusive-education-learning>.
- Li L. (2015). Woguo suiban jiudu zhengce yanjing 30nian: lichen, kunjing yu duice [The Three-Decade-Long Developments of China's Policy of Inclusive Education: the Process, Dilemma and Strategies]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education* 10: 16-20. (In Chinese).
- Li Z. H. (2010). Jin ershinian woguo suiban jiudu jiaoshi peiyang yanjiu huigu yu fansi [A review



- of and reflections on research into teacher-related problems with disabled students' learning in regular classes over the past two decades]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education* 6: 8-12. (In Chinese).
- Lipsky M. (1980). *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Liu C. L. (2008). Reflection on learning in regular class in China. *Prospects* 38(1), 154-160 (Chinese edition).
- Ma H. Y., Tan H. P. (2011). Shanghai shi suiban jiudu jiaoshi xianzhuang diaocha [A Survey of the Status quo of Shanghai Teachers for Special Students Learning in Regular Classroom]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education*, 1: 60-63. (In Chinese).
- Ministry of Education (1994). *Trial Measures of Implementing Learning in Regular Classrooms for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities*. www.people.com.cn/item/?fgk/gwyfg/-1994/206002199410.html.
- Ministry of Education (2011). "The Major Statistics of the National Education Development in 2009." Accessed May 17, 2018. http://www.moe.edu.cn/public/?les/business/html?les/moe/moe_633/201008/93763.html.
- Ministry of Education (2015). *Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Publishing the List of National Special Education Reform Experimental Areas*. Accessed September 20, 2018. http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3331/201501/t20150112_189313.html.
- Ministry of Education (2018). *Chengdu Shuangliu district's innovative way to promote inclusive education*. Accessed September 20, 2018. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s6192/s222/moe_1755/201809/t20180920_349475.html.
- Mitchell D., Desai I. (2005). Diverse socio-cultural contexts for inclusive education in Asia. In *Contextualizing Inclusive Education: Evaluating Old and New International Perspectives*, edited by D. Mitchell, (pp. 166-201). London: Routledge.
- Patton M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peng X. G. (2010). Zhongguo teshu jiaoyu fazhan mianli di liuda zhuanbian [The Great Changes Facing China's Special Education]. *The Journal of Education Research and Experiment*, 9, 3-8. (In Chinese).
- Peng X. G. (2011). Zhongguo quanmian tuijin suiban jiudu gongzuo mianli di tiaozhan he zhengce jianyi [On the Challenges Facing China in the Promotion of Inclusive Education and Relevant Suggestions]. *The Journal of Education Research and Experiment*, 11, 15-20. (In Chinese).
- Piao Y. X. (2004). Ronghe yu suiban jiudu [Inclusion and the Learning in Regular Classroom]. *The Journal of Education Research and Experiment*, 4: 37-40. (In Chinese).
- Piao Y. X. (2008). Gaige kaifang 30nian zhongguo teshu jiaoyu de fazhan yu biange [The Development and Change of Chinese Special Education After 30 Years' Open Door Reform]. *The Journal of Modern Special Education* 12: 4-13. (In Chinese).
- Piji S. J., Meijer C. J. W., Hegarty S. (Eds.) (1997). *Inclusive Education. A Global Agenda*. London: Routledge.
- Potts P. (2000). A Western perspective on inclusion in Chinese urban educational settings. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4(4), 301-312.
- State Council (2001). *The Suggestions on Further Advancing Reform and Development of Special Education in the Tenth Five Years*. Accessed January 10, 2018. <http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s3331/201001/82033.html>
- State Council (2006). *Compulsory Education Act*. Accessed January 10, 2018. http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view.asp?id=163284.
- State Council (2014). *Enhancement Project on Special Education (2014-2016)*. Accessed November 13, 2015. http://www.gov.cn/xxgk/pub/govpublic/mrlm/201401/t201401-18_66612.html.
- Xu S. Q., Cooper P., Sin K. (2018). The 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' initiative for inclusive education in China. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22 (1), 54-73.



- UNESCO (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. Salamanca: Unesco. http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF.
- Wiggins G., McTighe J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria: Ascd.
- Wong K. K. (1991). The Politics of Urban Education as a Field of Study: An Interpretative Analysis. In *The Politics of Urban Education in the United States: The 1991 Politics of Education Association Yearbook*, edited by G. James., R. Reed, and K. K. Wong. London: Falmer Press.
- Wong K. K., Anagnostopoulos D. (1998). Can Integrated Governance Reconstruct Teaching? Lessons Learned from Two Low-Performing Chicago High Schools. *Educational Policy* 12 (1), 19–30.
- Xiao F. (2005). Zhongguo de suiban jiudu: lishi, xianzhuang, zhanwang [Mainstreaming in China: History, Actuality, Perspectives]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education*, 3, 3-7. (In Chinese).
- Xu J. (2012). Development of learning in regular class and measure of teacher education in China. In *Future directions for inclusive teacher education: an international perspective*, edited by C. Forlin, (pp. 32–41). London: Routledge.
- Yan T. R., Deng M. (2019). Regular education teachers' concerns on inclusive education in China from the perspective of concerns-based adoption model. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23 (4): 383-404.
- Yu L., Su X., Liu C. (2011). Issues of teacher education and inclusion in China. *Prospects*, 41: 355-369.
- Yu S. H. (2011). Shanghaishi putong xuexiao suibanjiudu gongzuo xianzhuang de diaocha yanjiu [An Investigation into the Current Integrated Education in Ordinary Schools in Shanghai]. *The Journal of Chinese Special Education*, 4, 3–9. (In Chinese).
- Zhang H. M. (2010). Chongxin shenshi zhongguo suiban jiudu di kunjing [Reflection on the difficult position of “learning in regular classes” in China]. *Journal of Contemporary Education Forum*, 2, 17–18. (In Chinese).