

# ***Reforming Special Education Policy in China: Prospects and Possibilities***

**Kang Min<sup>1</sup>, Hua Yingyu<sup>1</sup>, Walter Huber<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Lanzhou Overseas Chinese Experiment School, Lanzhou Gansu, 730010, China*

<sup>2</sup>*Center for Regional Planning and Development Chair, Department of Political Science & Criminal Justice, New Concord State of Ohio, 43762, USA*

**Keywords:** Special education, Policy in china, Reforming, Prospects and possibilities

**Abstract:** The benefits to society of inclusion are well documented for students with disabilities and those who do not have a learning difference. Strong friendships, an appreciation and acceptance of those who are different, and learning to help others succeed are among the reasons inclusion is required by law in most western countries. This paper is concerned primarily with assessing the feasibility of increasing access to education for primary and secondary students in China with special needs. China's special education system has made tremendous strides since 1949 but still lags behind the west in terms of access to education for students with disabilities. While there are many studies on the benefits of special education, we know little on how China could move to such a system. Research examining how a policy shift would be implemented at the "street-level" within Chinese schools and what barriers this process would face is needed.

## **1. Introduction**

In the case of China, there are opportunities to improve access to education for different subsets of students with special needs not currently being served by the system. This paper identifies areas where there is broad support for increasing access to education for students with special needs and provides a roadmap for implementation of reform to the laws relating to providing educational opportunities to students with disabilities.

Special education in the United States has guaranteed free and appropriate education for students with special needs since passage of the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). Additionally, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 required any organization that provides programs and activities to children, whether they be public or private to not discriminate based on disabilities if they receive federal funds. This law applies to all public school districts. Those two laws provide a type of double assurance that people with a disability will be accommodated.

In 2010, China enrolled 60.1% of students who are officially recognized as having a disability or special educational need in a mainstream classroom (255,662 out of 425,613). However, according to official 2006 Chinese statistics, China recognized almost 2.5 million children as having disabilities. This might be due to some of these children being registered as regular students and/or some not going to school at all. Relatedly, the numbers of children with learning disabilities in China is small by international comparison. “In 2011 the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011, p. 30) estimated that the global prevalence of moderate and severe disabilities is 15.3% across all ages, and 5.1% among the 0-14-year-old population. The corresponding Chinese percentages, calculated from the *Second China National Sample Survey on Disability* (CDPF, 2007) and the *China Statistical Yearbook 2007* (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007) are almost three times smaller (6.3% and 1.8%).”

Part of the reason for the discrepancy is due to the assessment criteria. In China, the Central People’s Government uses six criteria: visual, hearing, language, intellectual, physical, and mental which are defined using medical criteria. In China, students with disabilities are often ignored in the classroom and may not receive appropriate instruction, because the teachers have neither the time nor knowledge to help them (Deng & Harris, 2008; Pang & Richey, 2006). Of the ten categories of learning disabilities recognized in the United States, only three are fully recognized in China and one category is partially recognized. A more inclusive educational system would recognize and accommodate more students who have learning disabilities not currently recognized in China. It is however unrealistic to suggest that China can currently accommodate every learning disability currently recognized and accommodated in the United States. The question is, this paper seeks to gain an understanding of which learning disabilities would be most likely to be recognized by the government.

In short, China lacks a national effort to provide special education training for teachers or space for students who have learning differences that do not fit the few categories currently recognized by the government. We surveyed 478 teachers in six different cities across China about their views on ten categories of learning disabilities, which they felt should be recognized and accommodated in the classroom, and the resources and training needed. Teachers were chosen since they should be high demanders of education and in a good position to identify roadblocks. Also, reforms benefit from the strong support of street-level bureaucrats tasked with implementation. Understanding the types of learning disabilities and which teachers readily accept and the resources and training needed to accommodate students is a precondition in education policy reform in China. By examining how far ahead in thinking teachers are with the existing policies, a better grasp of China’s growth in education policy can be gleaned. Knowledge of how Chinese teachers in different regions of the country view education reform adds to our understanding of the projected trajectory of education reform in China. Many reforms occur in a single city and knowing how teachers in different parts of China view special education gives predictive power to where education reforms are most likely to occur. This effort sheds light on which types of disabilities that are currently not recognized might be most likely to be acknowledged and accommodated in Chinese schools in the future.

## 2. Methods on the Research

Given the need to determine areas where providing educational opportunities to all students with different types of learning disabilities are likely to most supported, the authors conducted a survey of current and future teachers. The survey was designed and pretested in the spring of 2014. It was translated into Chinese and the meaning and intent of each question was cross-checked. It was then

administered to current teachers in four Chinese cities during the months of May and June of 2014. In July, approximately 200 students currently studying to become K-12 teachers in China studying at a Chinese university were given the same questionnaire. In this way, the researchers were able to get not only a sense of how current teachers who have years of experience view teaching students with learning disabilities, but were able to also get the views of the upcoming generation of teachers.

Questions were designed to determine which established learning disabilities Chinese teachers (K-12) were able to recognize, which they saw as needing to be accommodated, what resources they believed were needed to accommodate each type of learning disability, whether they believed students with different types of disabilities had the ability to succeed academically, and a series of questions to gauge teacher attitudes toward mainstreaming students with learning disabilities. Additionally, demographic questions were asked so that the data can be stratified according to gender, years on the job, grade taught, and the like. A copy of the survey in English can be found in Appendix A and a copy of the survey in Chinese can be found in Appendix B

### 3. Results and Discussion of Teacher Surveys

318 teachers in four cities in China were surveyed over the course of six weeks. We were able to get a broad sample that appears reasonably representative of teachers in urban settings. Surveys were given at multiple schools in four different cities (public and private) that covered different grades (K – 12). It should however be noted that the results should not be interpreted as valid for non-urban schools which were not part of our sample. Almost 2/3 (63.2%) of teachers surveyed were female and the average class size was over 45 with an approximately normal distribution (mean 49, median 48, mode, 50). The average number of years of experience of teachers was 11.56 and the curve was slightly skewed (median 10, mode 10) and while ages ranged from 20 – 72, the average reported was in the 30s (mean 36.6, median 36, mode 30).

#### 3.1 When Asked about Familiarity with Learning Disabilities, the Following Results Were Found:

Table 01: Familiarity with Learning Disabilities (in percentages)

|  | Very Familiar | Somewhat Familiar | Not Very Familiar |
|--|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Learning disability: difficulties in reading, writing, and computing.  | 35.2          | 64.8              |                   |
| Communication: difficulties in accurately producing the sounds of language or using language to communicate.                           | 34.6          | 65.4              |                   |
| Emotional disturbance: significant problems in the social-emotional area   | 34.6          | 64.5              | 0.9               |
| Autism: extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness.   | 34.0          | 66.0              |                   |
| Hearing impairment: partial or complete loss of hearing.   | 34.9          | 63.8              | 1.3               |
| Visual impairment: partial or complete loss of vision.   | 34.6          | 65.1              | 0.3               |
| Deaf-blindness: simultaneous hearing loss and vision loss.   | 38.4          | 61.6              |                   |
| Orthopedic impairment: physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.                              | 37.7          | 61.9              | 0.3               |
| Traumatic brain injury: a medical condition denoting a serious brain injury affecting learning, behavior, social skills, and language. | 33.0          | 67.0              |                   |
| Other health impairment: disease so significant that it affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.   | 33.0          | 66.0              | 0.9               |

The results are somewhat surprising to the authors since they are similar across all types of disabilities which seems odd given China does not currently recognize all of these types of disabilities and intellectual and psychiatric disabilities are not currently recognized.

### 3.2 The Results from the Second Set of Questions Shed Some Light on the Subject However:

Table 02: When Should Schools Accommodate Learning Disabilities (in percentages)

|  | Always Accommodate | Accommodate if not too expensive | Each school should decide | Never accommodate |
|--|--------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Learning disability: difficulties in reading, writing, and computing.  | 28.9               | 44.1                             | 27.0                      |                   |
| Communication: difficulties in accurately producing the sounds of language or using language to communicate.                           | 17.8               | 47.3                             | 34.9                      |                   |
| Emotional disturbance: significant problems in the social-emotional area   | 20.0               | 39.7                             | 40.3                      |                   |
| Autism: extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness.   | 12.7               | 39.0                             | 47.9                      | 0.3               |
| Hearing impairment: partial or complete loss of hearing.   | 16.8               | 37.8                             | 45.4                      |                   |
| Visual impairment: partial or complete loss of vision.   | 15.9               | 38.1                             | 45.7                      | 0.3               |
| Deaf-blindness: simultaneous hearing loss and vision loss.   | 17.5               | 42.0                             | 39.8                      | 0.6               |
| Orthopedic impairment: physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.                              | 21.3               | 37.5                             | 40.6                      | 0.6               |
| Traumatic brain injury: a medical condition denoting a serious brain injury affecting learning, behavior, social skills, and language. | 13.3               | 34.0                             | 52.1                      | 0.6               |
| Other health impairment: disease so significant that it affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.   | 12.4               | 32.1                             | 54.9                      | 0.6               |

The results from the first question raised the possibility that respondents were not answering truthfully since they were providing consistent answers to the amount of knowledge they felt they possessed on subjects where different levels of knowledge would be predicted. The results from the second question are suggestive that the results of the first question are due to something other than respondents providing information they do not believe to be accurate. Respondents provided (as predicted) differing levels of support for different types of learning disabilities. This suggests that accommodations for different types of disabilities will be more or less likely to be supported by teachers. Interestingly, there does not seem to be any correlation to how much knowledge teachers have about a disability and their willingness (or lack thereof) to desire to provide an accommodation for it.

3.3 The third set of questions deals with training. If the government is to provide an accommodation, it would be necessary to ensure adequate training for those expected to ensure it is being properly provided.

Table 03: How much additional training is needed to accommodate a student with a learning disability (in percentages)

|  | No additional training needed | Some additional training needed | A great deal of additional training needed |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Learning disability: difficulties in reading, writing, and computing.  | 2.3                           | 69.6                            | 28.2                                       |
| Communication: difficulties in accurately producing the sounds of language or using language to communicate.                           | 0.3                           | 62.7                            | 36.9                                       |
| Emotional disturbance: significant problems in the social-emotional area   | 0.6                           | 61.8                            | 37.6                                       |
| Autism: extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness.   | 0.3                           | 54.1                            | 45.5                                       |
| Hearing impairment: partial or complete loss of hearing.   | 0.3                           | 57.6                            | 42.0                                       |
| Visual impairment: partial or complete loss of vision.   |                               | 57.3                            | 42.7                                       |
| Deaf-blindness: simultaneous hearing loss and vision loss.   | 0.6                           | 59.9                            | 39.5                                       |
| Orthopedic impairment: physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.                              | 0.3                           | 61.1                            | 38.5                                       |
| Traumatic brain injury: a medical condition denoting a serious brain injury affecting learning, behavior, social skills, and language. |                               | 58.7                            | 41.3                                       |
| Other health impairment: disease so significant that it affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.   | 1.0                           | 51.7                            | 47.3                                       |

Additional training teachers feel they need is more consistent than was first hypothesized by the authors. While the results appear genuine, the results may seem puzzling at first glance. There is no significant correlation between knowledge of a learning disability, desire to accommodate, and belief in the need for training. However, results make more sense when placed in context of the schools. Teachers appear to have knowledge of different learning disabilities such as autism, generally believe that in principle it may make sense to accommodate students with a learning disability (at least in some limited context) but lack the expertise to actually provide the needed accommodation. This reflects a genuine desire to accommodate coupled with a honest appraisal of the current state of education of how best to accommodate students with different learning disabilities.

3.4 The fourth set of questions focused on whether students with different learning disabilities could in fact succeed in the teachers' view. This is an important measure. Areas where teachers do not feel students can succeed are less likely to be ripe for reform until this opinion is altered.

Table 04: Can students with learning disabilities succeed (in percentages)

|  | Can easily succeed if accommodation is given | Can succeed if accommodation is given but will take a good deal of extra effort | Unlikely to ever succeed even if accommodation is given |
|--|--|---|---|
| Learning disability: difficulties in reading, writing, and computing.  | 48.2   | 51.4  | 0.3   |
| Communication: difficulties in accurately producing the sounds of language or using language to communicate.                           | 34.7   | 65.0  | 0.3   |
| Emotional disturbance: significant problems in the social-emotional area   | 40.5   | 58.8  | 0.6   |
| Autism: extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness.   | 28.9   | 70.7  | 0.3   |
| Hearing impairment: partial or complete loss of hearing.   | 31.5   | 68.2  | 0.3   |
| Visual impairment: partial or complete loss of vision.   | 27.0   | 73.0  |   |
| Deaf-blindness: simultaneous hearing loss and vision loss.   | 39.8   | 60.2  |   |
| Orthopedic impairment: physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.                              | 31.8   | 67.8  | 0.3   |
| Traumatic brain injury: a medical condition denoting a serious brain injury affecting learning, behavior, social skills, and language. | 32.2   | 67.5  | 0.3   |
| Other health impairment: disease so significant that it affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.   | 28.8   | 69.9  | 1.3   |

The results of are quite encouraging. While there are some differences, it does appear that virtually all teachers surveyed believe that students with virtually any learning disability can in fact succeed with adequate resources. It does obviously remain to be seen whether the proper resources and training would be forthcoming but obstacles of teacher resistance appear unfounded. The results also suggest that a significant minority (over 25%) believe that minimal accommodations would be sufficient in many cases suggesting a degree of ready-made support among a subset of teachers to expand the list of learning disabilities to be more inclusive. The final set of questions dealt with more general issues relating to teaching students with learning disabilities:

Results suggest that teachers need more knowledge of, training in, and time for students with learning disabilities. Not surprisingly, limited resources (a problem in virtually all school systems across the world) frustrate many otherwise good ideas. None of this is surprising. However, a final question “do you see benefits in accommodating students with learning disabilities?” was asked at the end of the survey. Over half (52.1%) of respondents said “no” and only 47.9% said “Yes”. Additionally, this question had the largest number of non-responses with 16.0% choosing to leave the question blank. This gets to an important but often overlooked point about students with learning disabilities in China. There is an oft-reported bias in the Chinese education system for focusing scarce resources almost exclusively on the most gifted at the expense of those who may have the most need. This bias seems to be shared and potentially reinforced by the teachers. While a dispassionate accounting would allow for the knowledge of different learning disabilities and a realistic appraisal of the resources needed can be identified, there is not a clear majority of teachers who believe the effort is

worth the expenditure of already scarce resources. This suggests that the limits of China's drive to expand educational opportunities for those with learning disabilities may have less to do with providing information on the need than engaging in a philosophical discussion as to the merits of the proposal in the first place.

#### 4. Conclusion

We surveyed 160 students studying to become teachers and 318 individuals who were currently teachers. Some of the differences between the groups are easily explainable. For example, 63.2% of teachers were female and whereas only 51.9% of students training to be teachers were female. Age of students ranged from 19 – 25 and age of teachers ranged from 20 – 72. Teachers reported being somewhat more familiar with each type of learning disability than students did and were slightly more likely to want to accommodate any specific type of learning disability than students were. Students were, in general, more likely to feel there was a need for increased training than teachers were which likely reflects the differences reported in knowledge of the different types of learning disabilities. The two exceptions to this were views on the amount of additional training needed to accommodate a student with deaf-blindness and orthopedic impairment where the two groups were virtually the same. Students were also generally more pessimistic than teachers when it came to whether they felt a student with a learning disability (both in general and for specific disabilities) would be able to succeed. Exceptions were hearing impairment, visual impairment, and other health impairment where results were virtually identical. It should also be noted that differences in this last set of questions was less dramatic with differences averaging less than 15%. Finally, there was a striking difference in responses to the statement "I understand learning disabilities." For teachers, approximately 31% either disagreed (10.5%) or were neutral (20.4%) with 69% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. For students, more than half (59.3%) either disagreed (11.6%) or were neutral (47.7%) with only 40.7% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

The difference in responses between practicing teachers and students gives some bright spots for hope. The bright spot is that those who are in the profession seem to gain an understanding of and appreciation for students of different abilities. While not definitive, the results do suggest that those who enter the classroom continue their education and become more empathic over time and develop the skills to teach those who come to the classroom with different abilities and limitations. This is an encouraging piece of news and is suggestive that the increased funds being spent on primary and secondary education since 1979 are yielding positive returns on investment as teachers work to help all students, irrespective of ability or special need.<sup>i</sup> Overall, the comparison between the two groups suggests that those who become teachers continue to learn on the job and develop skills during their career to better assist students with different learning disabilities.

#### References

- [1] O'Halloran, K. A. (2006). *English grammar in context. Book 2, units 8-11, Getting inside English : interpreting texts.* The Open University.
- [2] Barthes, R. (1973). *Mythologies.* London, UK: Paladin Books.
- [3] Böhlke, R. F. (2008). *Constructing Ideal Body Appearance for Women: A Multimodal Analysis of a TV Advertisement* (Doctor's dissertation).
- [4] Callow, J. (1999). *Reading the visual: An introduction.* In J. Callow (Ed.), *Image matters: visual texts in the classroom* (pp. 1 – 13). Newtown, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association (PETA).

- [5] Coffin, C. (2006). *English grammar in context, Book 3: Getting practical*. The Open University.
- [6] Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.