

China Special Education for Disabled Children: Problems and Countermeasures

Wenqian Xue*

Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518043, China

* Corresponding Author Email: s21526.xue@stu.scie.com.cn

Abstract. Despite increasing awareness and political concern regarding the issue of inclusive education and educational inequality, China is still on its way to achieving education equality. The issue of special education for disabled students, problems related to preschool education, education equality within groups, and curriculum design are still matters of concern that hinder China's progression towards an egalitarian education system that guarantees equality. Although special education is specifically addressed in China's 14th Five-Year Plan, mere policy concern has not successfully translated into practical success. Through a thorough analysis of China's current situation, this article identifies three reasons that have thwarted the realization of this goal: a lack of micro-concern in policies relating to special education, misallocation of capital input due to a lack of sufficient regulations, and an insufficient supply of professional teachers. Countermeasures are proposed with the intention of improving China's special education system, with the hope of addressing the interests of students with special educational needs today.

Keywords: Special Education; Disabled student; Educational Study.

1. Introduction

The issue of special education has become a growing concern in China in recent years, with the primary concerns revolving around students with disabilities, who were often marginalized and neglected within the broader educational framework of the country.

China embarked on its development of special education relatively late, originating from the Qiming-Gumu School for blind children in Beijing in 1874 [1]. However, actual development, with increasing legislative protection and devoted effort, only started after 30 years of reform and opening [1]. Concerns for special education were raised within the Plan for the Development and Improvement of Special Education for China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). Although remaining somewhat vague and ambiguous, still successfully encourages and accelerates the development of China's special education system by raising awareness [2]. Despite the rapid speed of development, China's special education development still lacks a clear structure and goals. Thus, it is necessary to revise the situation and address the issues facing China's special education system today in order to achieve education equality in China.

2. Existing Problems with China's Special Education

2.1. Preschool Education

Preschool education for students with special educational needs is typically carried out in two major ways: separate preschool education and inclusive preschool education [3]. Separate (segregated) education involves preschool institutions and a curriculum specifically designed for students with special educational needs, with a separation of disabled students and non-disabled students either classroom-wise or school-wise. Inclusive preschool education typically involves disabled students and non-disabled students learning in the same school environment. While the current situation with both aspects remains dim, the need to develop inclusive preschool education in China is particularly neglected.

Between 2017 and 2019, the aggregated number of disabled students in China between the ages of 3 and 6 was 135,907, while only approximately 58,600 received preschool education [4]. This left the enrollment rate for preschool-disabled students at 43.12% [4]. The number deviates a little from district to district. Eastern China has the lowest preschool enrollment rate of 35.31%, and Northern China has a preschool enrollment rate of 48.03% [4].

Among those enrolled, most of them attend special schools. In 2019, among the 4993 pre-school disabled students attending schools, 4808 attend special schools, indicates that the enrolment rate of students with special educational needs into normal preschool education institution is below 5% [5]. Only certain Kindergarten accept students with disabilities. The early separation of disabled and non-disabled students could hinder the development inclusive education in the country.

Moreover, the curriculum of disabled students also shows an early canalization with students with disabilities and without. Pre-school curriculum for students with disabilities put hard emphasize on “rehabilitation” instead of “teaching”, blurring the distinction between receiving treatment and receiving education [4]. A majority of teachers for preschool education lack the sufficient medical and psychological knowledge to assist any specifically students with disabilities or to provide them with the necessary special support for rehabilitation. The problem of inefficiency arises.

2.2. Inequality within Disabled Groups

Despite relevant policies concerning students with disabilities, the enrolment rates of students with disabilities in China is still lower than expectation. In the second period special education plan planning (2017—2020), it is specified that by 2020, the enrolment of students with disabilities should reach 95% for compulsory education [6]. Statistically, the targeted is reach. However, it is clear that education equality is not realized within the group.

2.2.1. Comparison between Genders

Table 1. Comparison between Genders [7-9]

	Total school enrolment (2021)	Female School enrolment (2021)	Female/100 (Approx. 1.d.p)
Northeast	44983	15949	35.5
North	88944	33337	37.5
East	236213	82823	35.1
South	121707	41324	34.0
Central	151254	54590	36.1
Northwest	86309	34409	39.9
Southwest	190363	74511	39.1
Urban	288214	102739	35.6
Country and Town Area	375377	140125	37.3
Rural Area	217209	81353	37.5

There is a gender disparity shown in the access of education for disabled students. In 2021, out of the 38,049,193 registered individuals with disabilities, 16,047,263 are female [8]. However, according to Table 1, none of the regions have a school attendance rate with more than 40% female, with the lowest rate being 34.0%. Further effort should be devoted to ensuring educational equality between male and female disabled students [7].

2.2.2. Comparison between regions

Table 2. Comparison between Regions [7,8]

	Total School of Disabled students (2021)	Registered Persons with Disabilities Aged 0-15 (2021)	Percentage of total school enrolment/registered Disabilities Aged 0-15 (2021)
Northeast	44983	52695	85.4%
North	88944	114862	77.4%
East	236213	326764	72.3%
South	121707	174105	69.9%
Central	151254	213590	70.8%
Northwest	86309	115802	74.5%
Southwest	190363	230145	82.7%

The attendance rate for disabled students in schools varies from region to region. Northeast China, which has the lowest number of registered disabilities between 0-15, achieved the highest attendance rate of 85.4%. This rate is 15.5% higher than the attendance rates in Southern China and 14.6% higher than the rates in Central China (see Table 2). Overall, there is a significant disparity in educational opportunities for disabled students across different regions.

2.2.3. Comparison between Types of Disabilities

Table 3. Enrolment of students with disabilities in different level of Education [9]

2021	Primary Education	Junior Secondary Education	Senior Secondary Education	Enrolment of disabled students in Senior Secondary education/Enrolment of disabled students in Primary education (3.s.f)
Visual Impairment	25889	15186	1011	3.91%
Hearing Impairment	54459	27786	4942	9.07%
Speech Disability	21569	8234	125	0.58%
Extremity Disability	92311	53681	131	0.14%
Intellectual Disability	268081	99634	4992	1.86%
Mental Disability	21173	6565	202	0.95%
Multiple Disabilities	38528	11312	334	0.88%

Although the school entrants rate of disabled students in Primary education does not exhibit a great difference, inequality is apparent for Senior secondary education among students with different types of disability. The retention rate in Education for students with Hearing impairment and visual impairment is significantly higher than for students with intangible disabilities, such as mental disability and intellectual disability, as well as speech and extremity disabilities (see Table 3). More effort should be devoted to obtaining a higher education retention rate for all types of disabilities, especially for types of disabilities that show a significant decrease in high school enrolment compared to that of primary education.

2.3. Curriculum

As shown in Table 3, the enrolment of students in senior secondary education is disproportionately lower than the enrolment of students in primary education. This illustrates the difficulty of retaining disabled students in education due to problems with special education and its curriculum, which are manifesting in various aspects such as textbooks and assessments.

2.3.1. Textbooks

In recent years, more textbooks designed for individuals with visual impairment and hearing impairment have been published. Braille versions of textbooks are available for specific subjects such as Math, Chinese, and English, covering content from year 1 to year 6 [6, 10]. However, subjects like biology, history, and geography, which are covered in secondary education, do not have specifically designed and edited textbooks [6, 10]. Furthermore, the editing of textbooks neglects the needs of individuals with mental disabilities and intellectual disabilities, hindering their overall achievement.

2.3.2. Assessment

Students with disabilities are also allowed to take standardized exams such as Gaokao. Special conditions are granted to students with visual impairments, with a 50% extension of time, and to students with mental disabilities, with a 30% extension of time [11]. In 2022, the standardized exam allowed 30,035 students with disabilities to enter higher education [12].

However, the specific assessment scheme for students with special educational needs varies from school to school. In 2021, 320,775 disabled students attended schools for special education, 1,134 disabled students attended classes attached to primary/secondary schools, and 163,797 students followed regular classrooms for primary/secondary education [9]. Schools for special education and classes attached to schools employ a specific assessment scheme. However, most regular classrooms that accept students with disabilities for inclusive education fail to address the specific concerns of these students.

3. Reasons

3.1. Lacking Relevant Policies and Regulations

A major problem that hinders the development of educational equality for students with disabilities is the lack of specific policies and regulations. Although policies such as the Second Period Special Education Planning (2017-2020) was published and carried out, generally, policies that pay attention to the micro-level of policy execution are insufficient without practical guidance that can be realized on a regional level. Wording such as "it is encouraged..." and "for regions that are capable..." is used repetitively in policies regarding disabled students [13]. There is a lack of rigid regulations and policies that can compel regional governments to execute the policy. In nine regional policies regarding preschool education for disabled students, only five proposed specific punishments to emphasize their importance, while the other four did not address this aspect [14]. The ambiguity within specific policies prevents the policies from being effectively carried out.

3.2. Lack of Sufficient Capital Input and Misallocation of Capital Inputs

Moreover, there is a lack of sufficient capital input to help students with disabilities despite the increase in capital investment. In 2020, 15.332 billion yuan was devoted to special educational costs [6]. However, the increase in investment does not directly improve educational infrastructure and resources for students with disabilities. Even in schools in more developed regions, not all schools meet the requirements for accessible facilities for students with disabilities. For example, it is required that all schools with over 5 disabled students should construct a resource classroom specifically for these students with special needs [6]. Funding is provided for the construction; for example, Jilin District planned to allocate 300,000 yuan per classroom [6]. However, the requirements for resource classrooms are hardly met. Firstly, there is a lack of regulation and supervision for the policy to be

realized, and there is a lack of punishment when the requirement is not met. Secondly, the policy is published with ambiguity. For example, the policy stated that only schools with over 5 disabled students need the resource classroom. However, many students, especially in rural China, are not yet registered as disabled. This leaves room for regional governments and schools to evade the requirement and also creates difficulties for schools that need to apply for necessary funding. The misallocation of resources can lead to difficulties in the learning, living, and socialization process of students with disabilities, which again illustrates the government's negligence on the micro-level of the problem.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, by 2021, a total of 2,288 schools for special education were constructed [7]. This is way below the demand for special educational schools, especially for students with multiple disabilities who are "rejected" by ordinary schools or are not able to cope with them.

3.3. Lacking Specialized Teachers and Professors

Furthermore, there is a lack of specialized teachers and professors working with students with special educational needs, both in terms of quantity and quality. In 2021, the total number of faculty working in special education reached 82,529. Among these, the number of teachers working in special education is 69,000 [8]. However, the expertise of this group of teachers should still be put under scrutiny due to the incompetence in the education and training systems for teachers of disabled students. Although this shows an increase from previous years, it does not meet the needs of the large population of students with disabilities, which exceeds 110,000 [8]. Moreover, there is a lack of specialized professors to edit textbooks and design curricula for students with disabilities, mainly due to the complexity of the problem. As a result, students with disabilities face difficulties in accessing appropriate education.

3.3.1. University

The issue with the quality of teachers for special education largely stems from the position of the subject in universities, which places a strong emphasis on academic achievement rather than practicality [15]. There is a disparity between how teachers are trained and the real-life situations they encounter. This puts an additional burden on graduates majoring in special education, as they have to adapt to the actual teaching environment and poses a risk to students with disabilities who may suffer the consequences of having an inexperienced teacher with little understanding of their situation.

Moreover, the field of special education is highly marginalized in China's universities [9]. Only certain universities offer majors in special education, which leads to the disregard and devaluation of the field. Consequently, there is a decrease in the number of new teachers specializing in this area, further exacerbating the shortage of teachers for special education.

3.3.2. Job Positions Available

Although special education as a major seems to be highly devalued and marginalized, the major problem of the lack of supply of special education teachers does not seem to center around willingness. Rather, the position is highly competitive due to various factors such as the extra 15% special education allowance granted. The predicament today is not caused by an undersupply of teachers, but rather an oversupply of teachers compared to the undersupply of job positions to retain the talented. Due to the highly competitive environment, many students who graduated majoring in special education choose to work in other jobs. However, the illusion created by the competitiveness that the field of special education is oversaturated is a clear misguidance. The claim often neglects students studying in regular classrooms. In 2021, 163,797 disabled students followed regular classrooms for primary/secondary education [9]. Currently, disabled students involved in this kind of inclusive education are often neglected. There is a need to supply more specialized teachers and professors to design new curricula and give them more attention in school to help with their development. The need should not be disguised by the false prosperity of special education caused by an oversupply of

teachers who lack sufficient training, accompanied by the problem of lacking job positions which leads to over-competition, as it is guaranteed that this mechanism would not transfer any benefits to the students.

4. Countermeasures

4.1. Specifying Policies and Regulations

It is crucial to specify and publish relevant policies and regulations in special education to ensure their implementation at the regional level. These policies should include raising awareness for special education, providing practical guidance, and outlining specific punishments and regulations to ensure proper enforcement. In terms of awareness, published policies should clearly state their aims and goals to emphasize the importance of the issue. While policies alone cannot change attitudes, it is essential for special education policies to consistently emphasize the significance of the issue, facilitating future actions. Regarding practicality and effectiveness, policies should also focus on the micro-level, such as schools and students, rather than relying solely on statistics and figures. Effective communication channels must be established between the nation, regions, schools, and individuals to successfully implement these policies. Additionally, related policies like the registration of people with disabilities should be enforced to prevent mismanagement and neglect of any students with disabilities.

4.2. Increase in Funding

More funding is required for the development of special education, both in the construction of specialized schools and the improvement of aspects of special education in regular schools. Infrastructure should be developed with accessible facilities and resources in classrooms to support the development of students, which will be necessary to cater to the complex needs of students with disabilities. A similar standard of infrastructure should also be achieved in regular schools that enroll students with disabilities, while further effort should be devoted on a managerial level to ensure the inclusiveness of the school. This requires special funding for teacher training, special curriculum design, and further research.

4.3. Increase in Vocational Education

There should be an increased emphasis on vocational education to ensure that disabled students can successfully function in society. Especially in schools for special education, which separate students with disabilities from students at a very early age, extra effort should be devoted to socializing the students with disabilities by equipping them with the necessary skills to fit into society. To better serve this function, schools could also serve as a network to connect students with disabilities to the rest of the world by providing practical opportunities for students in higher grades, so that these students do not become disconnected from the real world [16].

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the current situation of disabled students with special educational needs in China's educational system, it is evident that there is still room for development in the Chinese educational system. China's preschool education for disabled students, although specifically addressed in China's 14th Five-Year Plan, is still underdeveloped. Inequality persists within the disabled group, with females, students in economically deprived regions, and students with complex disabilities being underrepresented within the educational system. Additionally, there is a lack of teacher professional development and specialized curriculum to ensure the proper development of disabled students in China.

This paper suggests that a concrete path could be designed to address these problems by analyzing their underlying causes. By doing so, China can make further progress in its pursuit of education

equality. However, a more in-depth analysis is required to propose a detailed and specific plan that is practical for China at this stage, taking into consideration the complex situation of its current economic priorities and regional differences. Future research should focus on the practical aspects of implementing these suggestions.

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